

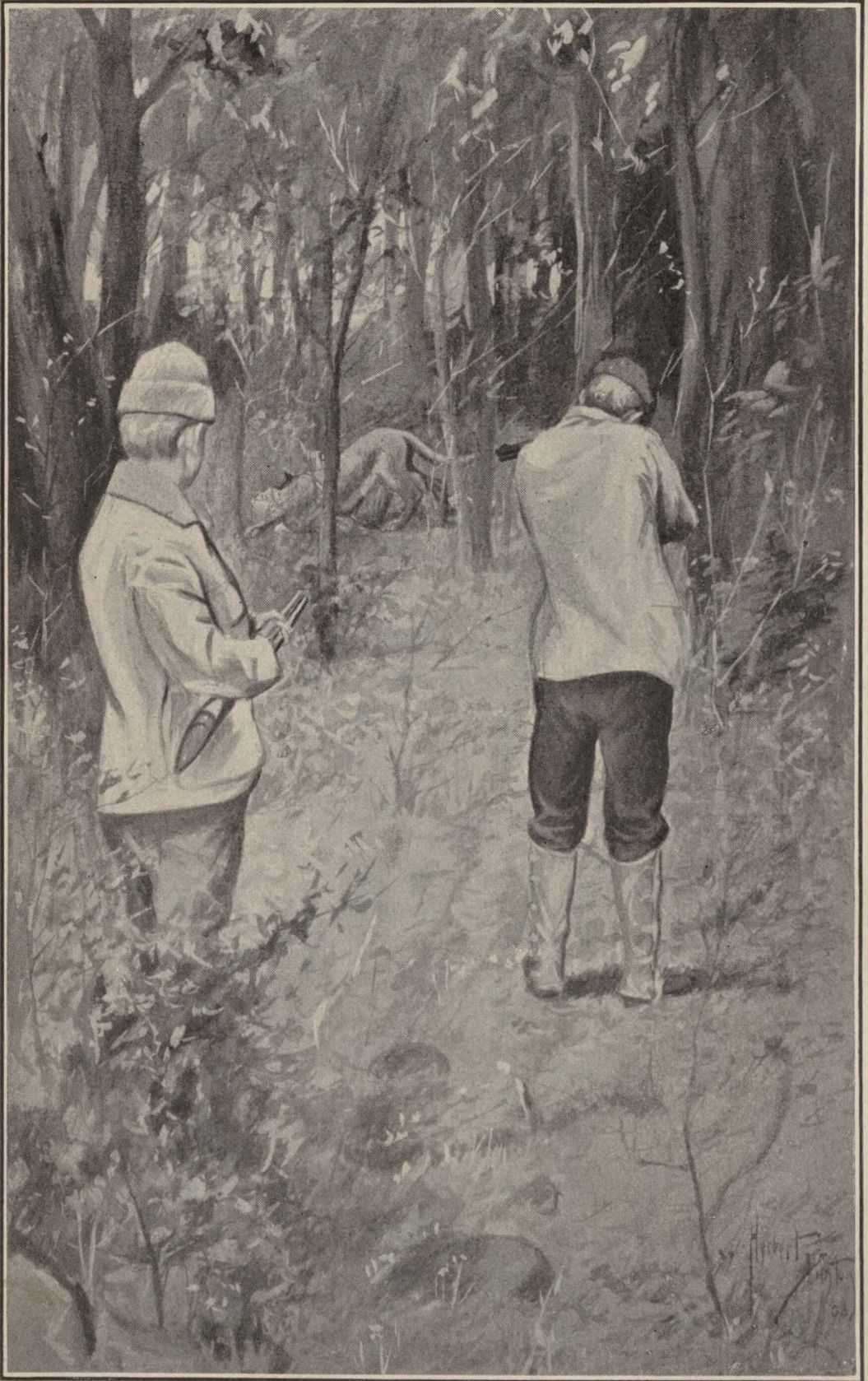


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Thad raised the rifle, and quick as a flash sent a 45-cal.
ball through the hindlegs

(Page 203)

Four Boys on the Mississippi;

OR THE

Cruise of the "Greased Lightning"

BY

FRANK E. KELLOGG

Author of "The Boy Duck Hunters," Etc.



ILLUSTRATED

BY

W. HERBERT DUNTON.

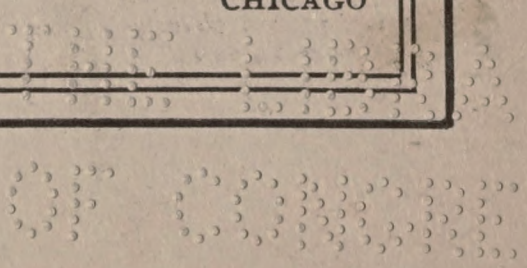
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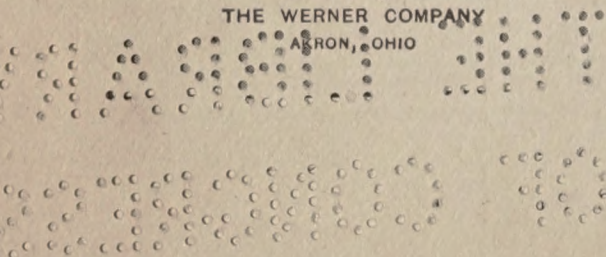


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CHAPTER I.

BUYING A HOUSEBOAT.

“Don’t move a muscle, Thad. Here comes a woodduck down the lake and it’s your shot.”

The speaker, a short, handsome, chubby-faced boy of fifteen or thereabouts, made not the slightest movement as he uttered these words.

The boy sitting beside him, a tall, slim, alert-looking fellow of seventeen, might have been a graven image for any effect the words produced. Not the slightest turning of the head, nor winking of an eye; but the hands that grasped a handsome breech-loader lying across his lap, gripped the gun a little firmer.

A moment later a bright plumaged woodduck, uttering the weird squealing cry of its kind, dashed past twenty yards distant. There was no swerving of its flight as it passed; to all ap-

pearances the boys were a part of the log upon which they sat. Although within a few feet, and in plain sight of the narrow wooded lake, they had no blind to shield them.

The duck was several yards past ere a move was made. Then the tall boy's gun went to his face like a flash and swept after the speeding fowl. A puff of smoke, a sharp report, and the woodduck went end over end and splashed into the water, where it lay motionless.

"Go get it, Bruno."

At the command, a handsome English setter arose from a bunch of grass at the end of the log and walking quietly down to the water, swam out to the drifting duck, picked it up and returning, laid it carefully beside half a dozen others of its kind.

The smaller boy showed no surprise over this dashing, brilliant kill. Evidently he was used to it. He could do the same thing himself, and knew it.

The boys remained seated a few minutes longer upon the log, watchful and expectant, then the tall boy said:

"I guess we may as well go home. We will hardly get any more shots as the ducks have evidently bedded in some other lake."

"I think so," was the reply. "We have seven of them, anyhow; that's enough for one morning."

The boys remained sitting a few moments longer and then arose to depart.

Those of our readers who followed the fortunes of Thad and Dick Kingston in "The Boy Duck Hunters," have probably suspected ere this that the boys are before us again, and they are right.

Thad and Dick Kingston, at your service, two of the best all-around game shots at their age to be found in the country. We might add that it would hustle many an older hunter to compete with them, for they have kept in constant practice and have grown older and stronger. Their muscles are firm and tough as iron, due to the pure country air and plenty of exercise in hunting and fishing. They are both just as manly and handsome as they were a year ago when we left them shooting wildfowl over decoys on the Mississippi, in "The Boy Duck Hunters."

But how Thad has grown! He looks six inches taller. Seventeen, and almost as tall as his father!

Dick is the same chubby, good-natured looking fellow we left a year ago. Although he has grown perceptibly, he is the same jolly Dick; just as much inclined to joke and bother Thad. And there stands the grave, sedate Bruno with his big, brown, kindly eyes. And this is Long Lake, too; the place where Dick killed his first woodcock and then made Thad's life a burden by bragging about it ever after.

“Dick, did you see Tom Evans last evening when you went after the mail?” inquired Thad, as they were walking home.

“Yes, I saw him a few minutes.”

“Is he keeping his eye peeled for a boat?”

“Yes, he is as eager as an old woman over a tea party. Says he stands on the river-bank about half the time.”

“I’m not bothering much over it. If we can’t buy such a boat as we want, we will build one. Frank Howard wrote he would be here about September fifteenth and this is the first. We have time enough,” remarked Thad.

“I suspect Frank will bring a fancy outfit. He will probably have stuff enough to load a barge.”

“He will bring the best to be found in New York for love or money, I’ll guarantee,” replied Thad, as they started up the bluff.

Perhaps we should explain what the boys are talking about. It seems, since we left them, Thad and Dick, together with a chum, Tom Evans of T—, and their Eastern friend, Frank Howard of New York, had planned a trip on the Mississippi in a houseboat. They proposed to buy, or if they failed to find a suitable one, to build a houseboat; have it towed several hundred miles up the Mississippi by a steamer; and float back down the river, hunting, fishing, trapping, and having a general good time.

At first, Mrs. Kingston opposed the trip. She

could not brook the idea of the boys' going so far away from home. But Mr. Kingston had so much faith in Thad's and Dick's good sense and ability to take care of themselves, that he was inclined to let them go. Besides, he thought the trip would prove a school of experience to them that would be a benefit in after life. So, among the three, they won Mrs. Kingston's consent. Of course, like all boys getting ready for a trip of that kind, they talked and thought of little else, and the mails were kept hot between T—— and New York.

The day previous to Frank Howard's expected arrival, their other partner, Tom Evans, came driving down at breakneck speed to the Kingston homestead.

"What's the matter, Tom? Anybody dead?" inquired Thad, as he and Dick walked out to the gate to receive their friend.

"Dead, nothing! Jump in quick. We've got a chance to buy the slickest houseboat you ever laid your peepers on," replied Evans excitedly.

"Bully! Come on, Thad," shouted Dick, and the boys jumped into the buggy and the trio was rapidly whirled back to town.

On the way, Tom gave them a few particulars. It seemed, a couple of young fellows, the sons of wealthy people who lived somewhere up North in an interior town, had started to make a trip down the Mississippi. Not being familiar with the river and its hidden dangers,

and being unused to hard knocks, the young voyagers, by running on hidden bars and snags, drifting against towheads, getting soaked in the rain, and nearly capsizing their craft several times, to say nothing of headwinds and other drawbacks, had become so tired and disgusted by the time they reached T—— that they were both heartily sick of their adventure, ready to sell the boat for anything they could get, and take the first train home. These things Tom hurriedly told the boys before they reached town.

“Did they set a price on it?” inquired Dick eagerly.

“No. I didn’t say anything about price. As luck would have it, I happened down to the bank when they came in; and the first thing, they asked me if I knew of anybody who wanted to buy a houseboat cheap. I told them there was a couple of young fellows living out in the country a ways, who had talked about buying one some time ago, but I didn’t know whether they had changed their minds or not. They told me they would pay for the rig if I would drive out and see them and ask them to come in and look at it. So you are getting a free ride at their expense,” said Tom with a chuckle.

“But say, boys,” remarked Thad suddenly, “we don’t want to rush into town pell mell as though we were after a bargain and run down to the river like a lot of lunatics. If we do, the price of houseboats will go up in this vicinity.”

“By George, Thad, you are right. We must do a little figuring,” replied Tom, checking the speed of the horse to a walk.

By the time they reached the livery stable, the boys had figured out a plan. Tom was to lead the skirmish line, going down to the river in advance, in a discouraged kind of a way as though he had done the best he could to get a buyer but had little hopes; and Thad and Dick were to come sauntering down a few moments later, looking indifferent and unconcerned.

Everything worked admirably for the boys; as, fortunately, the owners of the houseboat were very homesick and getting more so every hour. They were sitting out on the forward deck, smoking, and looking blue and discouraged when Tom strolled down.

“Did you find them?” asked the more disconsolate looking one, as Tom reached the shore.

“Yes, I finally persuaded them to come and look at it, but I don’t know whether you can do anything with them or not. They don’t seem to be over anxious. Here they come now,” replied Tom, as Thad and Dick straggled down to the river about six feet apart.

“Are you the parties that want to buy a houseboat?” inquired one of the voyagers eagerly.

“I don’t know. We did talk some of it a month ago, but it will depend a good deal on the price,” replied Thad indifferently.

“If you have the least idea of buying one here’s your chance. We will sell you this one

cheap as dirt. Come in and look her over," said one of the strangers.

Nothing loath, the boys went inside. In size it was about thirty feet long and ten feet wide with a flat scow-shaped bottom. The interior was ceiled throughout, making it tight and warm. It was divided into two rooms; the larger being the kitchen, dining-room, and sitting-room, and the smaller, a cozy bedroom, provided with two bunks each ample for two persons. The boat was furnished throughout with everything needed for a trip. A small but new cook-stove, among other things, with all the necessary cooking utensils; and everything of the best quality. Three windows on each side furnished plenty of light and ventilation.

"What do you want for the old tub?" inquired Thad indifferently, after they had looked around inside and gone on shore again.

Dick had made up his mind if the price was anything under seven thousand dollars, he would take it.

"To tell the truth, boys, the way she stands now, she cost us nearly two hundred dollars. We want to sell everything but our guns and a few trinkets, as we want to go home and don't wish to bother with packing up the stuff. You can have it all—boat, bedding, stove, groceries, and everything for forty dollars. That isn't more than twenty cents on the dollar," replied one of the homesick hunters.

By sheer force of will power, Thad and Tom each made his countenance fall, while Dick nearly bit off a quarter of an inch of his tongue by shutting his mouth quickly enough to keep from saying, "We will take her."

"Forty dollars is a good deal of money. You can build a pretty good-sized boat for that, nowadays," remarked Thad with imperturbable gravity, without taking his hands from his pockets.

"Not like this one, you can't. She is built of the best material and is tight as a drum. Don't leak a drop," replied one of the hunters confidently.

Thad and Tom walked around idly, whistling in an unconcerned way, as though neither cared a cent whether he bought a houseboat or not. Dick was so nervous he just *couldn't* keep still. He was afraid every minute that the voyagers would change their minds, declare the deal off, and go on down the river. Dick's commercial education had been sadly neglected, and he knew nothing about driving sharp bargains. He asked the price of a commodity and, if he wanted it and had money enough, he bought it. Inwardly he blamed Thad's and Tom's stupidity in not clinching the bargain at once, before the owners had a chance to back out.

"I don't know whether we will get our money out of her or not, but if you want thirty-five dollars for the outfit, we will take it, and run the

chances," said Thad reflectively, while Dick held his breath.

"What do you say, Clarence, shall we take it?" asked the larger boy, turning to his partner.

"Yes, let her slide; and let's take the first train home. I'm sick of the whole thing," was the reply.

"Any bugs or other live stock inside?" asked Thad, as he paid over thirty-five dollars in crisp bills and took a receipt.

"Nary a bug nor insect. She was just built this fall. When does the first train leave?" said the larger boy, as he pocketed the money.

"In forty-five minutes," replied Tom, looking at his watch.

"In forty-five minutes we will be on our way to God's country," remarked the smaller boy with a look of unutterable relief.

"Correct, Clarence; and the next time we take a trip we will go on a passenger train," replied his companion. "You see, boys," he continued, as they went inside to pack up their guns and a few articles of clothing, "we were never on the river before in our lives. Hardly knew how to row a skiff. But somebody told us it was great fun to take a trip down the Mississippi; there was no work connected with it, just float along. So, like a couple of simpletons, we couldn't rest until we had a boat built and tried it. We will go home satisfied now. It may be lots of fun for people who know the river and understand boat-

ing, but excuse me. Honestly, I haven't worked so hard since I was born. You will find everything all right. We had plenty of money, and used the best material. There are some groceries, two dozen steel traps, and a lot of odds and ends that will come handy if you want to take a trip. I never want to see them again."

"We have learned a few things anyhow, George," broke in the other boy, as he surveyed a pair of hands evidently unused to labor, but which were now covered with callouses and blisters.

"Yes, we learned there was a snag or sandbar every hundred feet, and we didn't have a bit of trouble in hitting three-fourths of them. In fact, we haven't done anything but push off of sandbars and snags since we started," replied George facetiously, as they started for the depot to get their tickets.

After the homesick adventurers had departed, the boys examined their new possession more thoroughly. They found everything even better than they had expected. In fact, they were tickled all over with their bargain. Frank Howard was expected to arrive the following evening, and the three boys could hardly wait, so eager were they to show him the bargain they had secured. Frank's train did not arrive until long after dark, and Dick, always impatient, proposed they get a lantern after he came, and show him the houseboat that night.

"Lantern, your grandmother!" said Thad. "We won't tell him a thing until we take him down next morning and show it to him. In the meantime we will make him believe he has got a job driving nails and plugging oakum for a couple of weeks."

"That's so. We will give him a surprise," assented Tom with a grin.

This programme was carried out; and when the train bearing Frank Howard rolled into the depot, Thad, Tom, and Dick had succeeded in scraping the grins from their faces, and looked decorous, although Dick had to sit on his safety-valve to keep from blowing off.

"Here he is. Hello, Frank!" shouted Dick.

"Hello, Dick! Hello, Thad! Hello, Tom!" and Frank suddenly found use for half a dozen arms all at once.

"How many trunks?" inquired Thad, after their friend's arms were nearly shaken loose.

"Only two; I didn't bring much stuff with me," replied Frank, laughing.

"Leave them in the baggage-room until morning. We will drive in for them after breakfast. We have business in town in the morning, anyhow. Tom is going to stay with us to-night, too; so we can talk things over. Come on," said Thad, winking at Tom.

"Any show of buying a houseboat?" asked Frank, as the quartet was driving home.

"I don't know of any for sale. Houseboats seem to be awful scarce this fall for some reason," replied Thad evasively, while Dick, on the back seat, was going through the most violent facial contortions in the moonlight, as if he were suffering with a severe fit of colic.

"We will probably have to build one. We can do it all right, although I was in hopes we could buy one, and save the time and trouble," said Frank.

"How are you on driving nails, Frank?" asked Tom.

"I don't know. I never drove a dozen in my life, but I can learn," replied Frank cheerfully.

"After you have pounded your finger nails black and blue, you can carry water for the regular workmen," remarked Dick with a chuckle.

"All right; I'll do anything. You can't scare me a bit," replied Frank, laughing.

"Don't let them bother you. We will get a houseboat some way," said Thad consolingly.

"Of course we will. And I'll show you boys that I can stand grief as well as the rest of you," said Frank with a laugh.

Two or three times during the evening, Dick made a "break" that almost gave their surprise away, but a friendly, unnoticed kick from Thad, turned the subject in time and left Frank unsuspecting.

It was midnight before the boys retired, and after one before they succumbed to sleep, so eager were they in discussing their trip.

The next morning after breakfast, the boys hitched up and drove to town, ostensibly to get Frank's baggage.

"Suppose we walk down to the river and see if any houseboats have come in during the night," remarked Tom casually.

"Yes, come on, I want to see how the river looks, anyway," cried Frank.

As they strolled down to the levee, Frank caught sight of a houseboat lying at the bank. "Say, boys, there is a boat, and it looks like a dandy. I wonder if there is any show of buying it," cried he with sparkling eyes.

"Why, that one was there yesterday. I neglected to mention the fact to you last night. It is a dandy, but the owners won't sell it. They are going to take a trip, and you can't do a thing with them," remarked Thad in an off-hand way.

"Too bad. And it's just the size we want. I wonder if the owners will set *any* kind of a price on it. If they will, I'll pay the extra amount out of my own pocket," said Frank in such a disappointed tone that Dick was forced to drop behind to work off another facial contortion.

"We might go in and see them. Perhaps you can get them to set a price. Thad and I worked with them for half an hour yesterday," remarked Tom. Dick nearly exploded once more, but finally succeeded in turning it into a sneeze.

"Yes. Let's go in and see if I can do anything with them," said Frank eagerly.

So the boys filed on board, and Thad rapped on the door. There was no response, and Thad remarked: "I have a key that one of them let me take yesterday. We might go in and see if they are up yet."

He unlocked the door and the boys walked in. No one was in sight, and Frank remarked unsuspectingly: "Maybe they have gone up town."

"I'll tell you where they are, boys. I saw them all driving out in the country last night," said Dick. Then he caught Tom's eye. That was the last straw, and Dick, Tom, and Thad burst into a roar of laughter.

"What the dickens are you ninnys all laughing at?" said Frank greatly perplexed. Then a light dawned upon him, and he cried:

"Ah, I see. You scamps have bought it, and you are trying to play a joke on me. Hurrah!" and he executed a hornpipe in true city style.

"Yes, she is ours. It was only by a scratch we got her, though," said Thad.

"How was that?" asked Frank.

"Oh, a couple of rich young fellows up North started on a trip down the Mississippi. They got it into their heads it was lots of fun and no work, but neither of them knew a thing about the river or handling a boat, and by the time they reached here, they were so homesick and tired out from dodging sandbars and snags, that they gave up the trip in disgust, sold us the

whole outfit, and took the first train for home," said Thad, as Frank was wandering around examining the boat.

"We thought we would find out if you had sand enough to think of building a boat," said Dick.

"I hope you will find out I have 'sand' before we get back," replied Frank, as he walked around examining the various lockers and closets for tools, clothing, et cetera, of which there were several.

"You must have had to put up pretty handsomely for this outfit," he observed.

"What do you suppose we gave?" asked Thad.

"Oh, probably a hundred and fifty," replied Frank, who had vague ideas about the value of things.

"Just a hundred and fifteen too high," replied Thad with a grin.

"What! The boat and all for thirty-five dollars!" said Frank in astonishment.

"That's the size of the investment. Here is the receipt," replied Thad, handing Frank the paper.

"I guess it is a lucky thing Frank wasn't here yesterday. Between Dick and him, it would have bankrupted us to buy it," remarked Tom.

"That's right, Tom. If Dick and Frank had come down here alone, they would have insisted on those fellows taking about four hundred dollars for it," replied Thad.

“It would have depended upon how much money we had. Wouldn’t it, Dick?” said Frank laughing.

“Altogether. They could have had my last dollar. I almost got St. Vitus’ dance yesterday waiting for Thad and Tom to strike a bargain. They stood around on one leg for half an hour, trying to make those two fellows believe it wasn’t worth more than thirty-five dollars. I expected every minute the boys would push off and go on down the river. If they had, you would have arrived probably just in time to attend these two fellows’ funerals,” replied Dick.

“Well we got her, anyhow. We will be snug as bugs in a rug,” said Frank enthusiastically.

“And see here, Frank. Here are dishes, and frying pans, and dripping pans—everything ready to get up a square meal with,” said Dick, who had not gotten over his love of eating since we last met him and who, as usual, couldn’t be kept out of the kitchen with a stuffed club, especially if anything were cooking.

“Say, Frank,” interrupted Thad, “we must get your trunks. I want to go through them and see what you brought along.”

“That’s so. I am anxious to see them myself, and know if everything is all right.”

So the quartet of enthusiastic hunters went to the baggage-room, loaded up the trunks and drove back to the Kingston residence, where Frank unlocked his trunks, got out his war

material, and exhibited it to an appreciative audience.

"What are you going to do with all of those drygoods?" asked Dick, as Frank pulled out a stack of under-clothes, corduroy pants, hunting coats, vests, hats, et cetera—to say nothing of clothes for wear in civilization—enough to start a country store.

"They will come handy. I may get wet half a dozen times some day and want a change," replied Frank, as he went on piling out goods.

"Now you are coming to something interesting," said Thad, as Frank lifted out a leather gun-case.

"This is my new shotgun. The old one was rather light for this trip, papa thought, so I sold it and bought a heavier one. This one weighs seven and three-quarters," said Frank, putting the handsome breech-loader together and handing it to Thad for his inspection, with the remark: "That is guaranteed to pull ducks from the clouds."

"Must use hornet's-nest wadding," observed Dick, as Thad was admiring the gun. At which sally everybody laughed; for Thad's and Dick's adventure with the hornets had become generally known.

"This is for big game: elephants, lions, panthers, deer, and so forth," said Frank, lifting out another case and extracting from it another gun.

“What is it?” inquired Dick.

“It is a Winchester rifle; what is called the model of “73”; 45-70 calibre, and a repeater. Shoots fifteen times without reloading. If we don’t get a chance at elephants or deer, it will come handy for geese on sandbars, as it will kill at several hundred yards.”

“Fifteen times? Whew!” exclaimed Dick.

“I’ll show you how to kill geese off-hand at three hundred yards with this,” said Tom, throwing the deadly-looking piece to his shoulder and pointing it out of the window at the Mississippi. “I’ll write my name across a flock of geese sometime, just to show you how it’s done,” he added, lowering the weapon.

“You may write your name, but I doubt if you write the obituary of many geese. I would hate to depend on what you kill with it for my grub,” observed Dick.

“I guess not either. If I took the job of supplying you, I should want two howitzers and a bait net,” retorted Tom.

“Here is something, boys, I brought along to amuse ourselves with. It may furnish us more sport than anything,” said Frank, taking out still another case.

“Goodness’ sakes! More guns?” queried Dick in astonishment.

“Of course. Nothing like a variety.”

“What have you now?” inquired Thad.

“It’s a little Stevens 22-calibre, target rifle.

Fitted with both open and peep sights. You can drive tacks with it at seventy-five yards. It will be just the thing to plug squirrels in the eye, or mud-turtles in the ear, coming down the river," said Frank.

"That's the stuff. She's a daisy, and breech-loader, too," said Dick, as he peeped through the sights.

"Who is going to perform the tack act," inquired Tom.

"I am, of course. Before we get back, I will be shooting the heads off of bumble bees," replied Dick.

"Or hornets," supplemented Frank with a wink.

"How much ammunition did you bring?" inquired Thad.

"I brought two thousand shells, loaded with 9's, 6's, and 3's, for the shotgun; two thousand for the target rifle, and five hundred for the big 45. Is that enough, think?" asked Frank.

"Plenty. We will have shells to throw away, probably," said Thad.

"I thought it best to get all we would be likely to need, at home where I could get them cheaper and probably better, than depend on getting them along the river," said Frank.

"Say, boys. I thunk a thought the other day and I believe I'll spring it on you fellows now, and see how it strikes you," remarked Thad.

"Better spring it in sections," warned Dick.

"I've been thinking, we ought to have a song of our own to sing while we are on this trip. Something new and original," continued Thad, looking around to see how his idea "took."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea; but how are we to get it? I don't believe any of us have poetic ability enough to write a song, much less set it to music," said Frank thoughtfully.

"Oh, as to the music, we could use the air to some old song that we are all familiar with. The fact is, boys," Thad continued, looking around warily, "I have—er—that is to say, I have—ahem—er—"

"Put a pebble in your mouth like Demosthenes used to," suggested Dick.

"I was going to remark," continued Thad without heeding Dick's sarcasm, "that I had—had written a song."

"The dickens you have!" said Frank.

"For the love of Peter!" gasped Tom.

"'And the mountain labored and brought forth a mouse.' Thank goodness the worst is known," said Dick with a sigh of relief.

"I don't know about that. He hasn't read it yet," said Tom grimly.

"Where is this effusion, and when do you propose springing it on us?" queried Frank cautiously.

"I have it right here in my left inside coat-pocket. And if your nerves are all right, I'll lock the door and read it at once," said Thad, making a move toward his side pocket.

"All right, I can stand it if the rest can," said Tom.

"Turn on steam," said Frank.

"Go ahead. But I draw the line on locking the door, it's too far to the ground," said Dick, walking to the window and looking down.

Without more ado Thad pulled a paper from his pocket and remarked:

"This masterpiece is to be sung to the air of 'Nelly Gray.' "

"Grit your teeth, boys," warned Dick.

"Shut up. He is going to read," said Frank.

"Sing it," suggested Tom.

"All right. Here goes," said Thad.

He then sang the following doggerel:

We are floating down the river, four young,
jolly hunters bold,

Hunting, fishing, trapping, singing, by the
way.

We can dodge the reefs and sandbars, and we
never fear the cold,

We've a staunch and cozy boat, you hear me
say.

CHORUS.

We'll be happy, we'll be gay; care and trouble
get away,

And we'll yank the juicy musquash from his
lair.

28 FOUR BOYS ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

We will eat him tail and feathers, and we'll top
off with a bass.

We will pull the royal mallard from the air.

When our guns boom out, the wildfowl hit the
water like a brick

And the pheasant, snipe, and quail turn up
their toes.

Well they know their time is coming, for the
famine-breeding Dick

Is among us, ever hungry, hence their woes.

CHORUS.

We will trap the mink and musquash, chase the
joyous ringtailed coon

Through the woods, and up a tree we'll make
him hum.

Roast him brown with sweet potatoes rich with
gravy, what a boon.

Gather 'round and sniff the fragrance, yum-
a-yum.

CHORUS.

"That's all," said Thad with a bow.

"Bully!" shouted Tom.

"That's awful," said Dick.

"What do you think, professor?" inquired
Thad, turning to Frank.

"I pronounce it one of the ripest productions
of the age. It is simply immense," said Frank.

“That’s the trouble. It’s too awfully ripe. It ought to have been picked sooner. The last two lines in the last verse are all right though. The sentiment in them is fine,” and Dick sang: “ ‘Roast him brown with sweet potatoes, rich with gravy, what a boon.

Gather ’round and sniff the fragrance, yum-a-yum.’

“Those two lines redeem the whole thing. Consider it accepted.”

“I think it’s all good. We’ll make the old Mississippi ring with it,” remarked Tom.

“And say, boys,” said Thad, “if you have recovered from the shock of this song there is another thing we should attend to. We want to elect a commander and subordinate officers.”

“That’s so,” said Tom.

“What title shall we invest the commanding officer with?” asked Frank.

“How does ‘Commodore’ strike you?” asked Thad.

“ ‘Commodore’ or ‘Rear Admiral’ will do; but what will the rest be?” remarked Dick.

“Oh, captains, first mates, roustabouts, and so forth,” said Thad.

“If it’s agreeable all round, the rest of you fellows can take the offices of Commodore, mates, and roustabouts, and I’ll be the ‘and so forth,’ ” remarked Dick.

“Oh, there are plenty of offices to go round,” said Tom.

"To save further parley, I propose we make Thad Commodore," observed Frank.

"I'll agree to that. What do you say, Dick?" said Tom, nodding approvingly.

"I'm satisfied. Thad probably knows as little as any of us about ships and nautical lore generally. We want somebody, of course, that knows as little as possible," replied Dick.

"Then the rest of us can all be first mates, and swear at each other," suggested Tom.

"I'll tell you a scheme, boys," said Dick. "Let's make Thad Rear Admiral and roust-about both, and the rest of us Commodores. Then Thad can boss and swear at us until there is some work to be done, then he can be roust-about and we can swear at him."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work. Let's make Frank first mate; Dick second mate, and Tom purser," said Thad.

"That suits me, particularly if there is going to be anything in the purse," remarked Tom.

"Well, if the offices are all settled, when do we start?" asked Dick.

"Suppose we figure on going about the twentieth, if the 'Mountain Belle' comes along. The sooner we start, the more time we will have on the river," said Thad.

"Is the 'Mountain Belle' going to tow us up?" asked Frank.

"Yes. Papa has arranged with the captain, who is a friend of his, to tow us up and drop us off anywhere we wish to start from."

"Then we want to be getting ready. We haven't any too much time."

The next few days were busy ones for the young hunters. They bought and stored on the boat everything that they had the remotest idea would be useful for eating, wearing, or amusement—guns, ammunition, traps, groceries, clothing, bedding, et cetera. They also took a goodly number of books and magazines and sets of checkers and chessmen, for strange to relate, every one of the four boys could play a fair game of chess. Everything was loaded and ready the day before the Mountain Belle was expected, and the boys stood on the bank scratching their heads, trying to think if there was anything overlooked.

Suddenly Tom said: "Boys, we have forgotten something."

"For goodness' sakes, what *can* we have overlooked?" said Thad anxiously.

"We have forgotten to paint a name on her."

"Sure as shooting. But we can do it yet. Decide upon a name and we will have it painted on right now," said Thad.

"Call her the 'Water Witch,'" suggested Tom.

"Call her the 'Thunder Bolt,'" said Thad.

"Call her the 'Water Palace,'" said Frank.

"Call her the 'Belinda Jane,'" said Dick.

"We can't call her all of those names, boys. And we want to decide on something at once so the paint can dry," remarked Thad.

"I'll tell you what to call her, fellows. She is probably as slow a craft as ever floated down the Mississippi. Let's call her the 'Greased Lightning,' " suggested Dick.

Dick's odd suggestion struck the boys favorably, and they all acquiesced.

" 'Greased Lightning' goes then," said Thad, as he started up town in search of a painter.

His quest was successful, and before the day had passed the name, "Greased Lightning," stood out in bold letters on either side of the little craft.

The boys had picked up two good skiffs, one small and the other medium sized, with which to do their running around on the Mississippi and other smaller bodies of water where they might chance to be hunting and trapping.

Bruno was to form one of the party, as a matter of course, not only as a companion, but also because his aid would be invaluable in retrieving and finding game.

The following day when the Mountain Belle arrived, she found the boys ready and eagerly waiting. The little houseboat was lashed fast to the big steamer, adieux were said, and the young hunters started on their voyage.

CHAPTER II.

AFLOAT ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

The ride up the Mississippi was greatly enjoyed by the quartet of young hunters. The weather was fine, and they had nothing to do but enjoy the scenery. Past frowning cliffs and low wooded hills now gemmed with the brilliant hues of autumn, past dozens of little rivulets, creeks, and more pretentious rivers drained by the Mississippi they ploughed their way until, the Mountain Belle meeting with no mishaps, the Greased Lightning was dropped one beautiful evening at the upper end of a great forest and bottom, whence the boys were to start down the river on their long voyage. The houseboat was securely tied to the bank, a hasty supper was disposed of, and the young hunters soon turned in and slept like tops until morning.

Tom had been appointed cook for the first week, and hardly had the sun peeped through the east windows when he rolled out promptly,

built a fire, and taking down the cook-book began wrestling with the mysteries of getting breakfast.

“What’s the menu this morning, Tom?” inquired Dick from the bedroom.

“The bill of fare this morning is ham and eggs, bread and butter, and coffee,” replied Tom.

“For goodness’ sake, do you have to study an old cook-book to find out how to cook ham and eggs?” asked Thad scornfully.

“No, I don’t,” said Tom shortly. “You just lie still and keep your face closed. I’m running the culinary department at present, if you *are* Commodore. I haven’t looked into a cook-book for a little over eighteen years, but this being the first meal aboard ship, I thought I would give you gents a touch of high living according to the illustrious authority of Hoyle. This volume says to cut the ham six-sixteenths of an inch thin, parboil ten minutes, then dry with a cloth made of Lonsdale muslin, costing not less than ten cents per yard.”

“Does it say anything about frying the ham afterwards?” inquired Frank.

“Not a word. Hold on, here is a foot-note at the bottom that says people who are very particular insist on frying the ham.”

“Does it specify at what factory the muslin shall be made?” asked Dick from under the bedclothes.

“Nope.”

“Then we are saved. Cook me two slices clear across the ham, and four eggs turned over,” said Dick.

“If you keep up that gait, Dick, you will either weigh a ton or be dead before we get home,” remarked Frank.

“Don’t worry about him. His stomach is made of india-rubber. If eating affected him, the jimson weeds would have been blooming over his grave long ago,” replied Thad.

“We will eat him tail and feathers and we’ll top off with a bass,
And we’ll pull the royal mallard from the air,” sang Tom as the savory odor of ham was wafted through the room.

“By George, boys. I intended as much as could be to have sneaked out at daylight and caught a three-pound black lass for breakfast, without waking any of you fellows,” remarked Frank, as he started to dress.

“That’s a middling plausible fairy-story for one so young, and especially from New York, to spring on a lot of old-timers,” said Thad.

“Breakfast is now ready in the dining-car,” announced Tom a few minutes later.

“What did you say the name of that gentleman was you used to cook for?” asked Dick, as he tackled a slice of ham big as the top of a wash basin.

“The Ahkoond of Swat.”

“Could he eat any more than I can?”

“Of course not. Did you suppose he was an elephant?”

“I don’t know what the rest of you fellows think, but I pronounce this pretty middling,” observed Thad, gazing out of the window at the crimson east.

“This is doubtless the greatest event that ever occurred in the world’s history. That little raid of Alexander of Macedonia through Asia was tame compared to this trip,” replied Frank.

“Tom is such a glorious cook, I believe we ought to give him the office permanently,” said Dick, appropriating another slice of ham.

“I believe you won’t. You can’t jolly me up that way. You will all take your little whirl at it in due time,” replied Tom.

After breakfast the boys decided to drop down the river a mile or so, land, and explore the forest and bottoms to ascertain what the outlook was for hunting and trapping.

The fastenings of the two skiffs were looked to, the lines cast off, and they were ready.

“Already, Commodore, when you are,” cried Frank.

Commodore Kingston sprang out on the forward deck and roared out:

“Shake out the mains’l! Loose the top-gal’nts! Reef home the jib! Man the lee scuppers! Haul in the knightheads! Push with your shoulders there; push, you lubbers, push! Stand by to meet her, Tom.

The Greased Lightning, however, failed to respond properly. She heaved a drunken sigh, wobbled a little, and settled back on the mud.

“What’s the matter down there? How much steam you carrying?” yelled the Commodore, looking over the side of the ship where Frank and Dick had their shoulders against the gunwale, pushing until their eyes stuck out like turnips.

“There is a whole lot of things the matter,” replied Dick, straightening up and wiping his brow. “In the first place, Frank and I are trying to shove eighteen tons of mud and this old tub, to say nothing of you two lubbers, out in the river. We lack about seven hundred pounds of having steam enough. If you two lubbers, instead of hindering navigation, will jump off and get your shoulders against here, maybe we will get off sometime to-day. I’ve got curvature of the spine now.”

“You’ve got curvature of the toes. I’ll fix her,” cried Thad, springing ashore and seizing a pole. He got a pry under the Greased Lightning that loosened her from the mud, and she slowly slid out into the stream.

“Man the other sweep, Tom. Wash the dishes, Dick. Get out the bear-traps, Frank,” shouted Thad, springing on board and taking the forward sweep.

“This is jolly, isn’t it?” said Frank, as their craft caught the current and started for the Gulf of Mexico at a three mile an hour clip.

“Wonder how many sandbars we’ll hit going down?” remarked Dick.

“We won’t hit them until we come to them; so we won’t worry over it in advance,” replied Frank, going inside to look over the traps.

“Hang onto your hat, Commodore. We’re going pretty fast,” remarked Dick facetiously, poking his head out of the door.

“You go in and wash the dishes or you’ll get strung up at the yardarm,” replied the Commodore.

“We’ll be happy, we’ll be gay; care and trouble
get away,

And we’ll yank the juicy musquash from his
lair.

We will eat him tail and feathers, and we’ll top
off with a bass,

And we’ll pull the royal mallard from the
air.”

Frank’s rich baritone took up the chorus and the rest joined in with a will.

By this time the Greased Lightning was well out in the stream and making satisfactory progress; so the boys fastened the sweeps and let her float.

“Where do we land first?” asked Frank, looking up from the floor where he was sitting surrounded with traps.

“In the mouth of that little river that comes in out of the woods about a mile below. What do you say, Tom?” said Thad.

"That's the spot I picked out yesterday when we passed it," replied Tom.

As they floated along, Dick washed the dishes, while the rest busied themselves getting the guns and traps ready.

"This big repeater is what takes my fancy," remarked Tom, fondling the 45-70 affectionately.

"Pooh. We'll have four times the fun with the little 22. You see if we don't," replied Dick, as he hung up the frying pan and wiped off the table.

"Of course we'll do more shooting with it, for there is more of that kind of shooting; but wait till you see me fetch a big Canada goose at four hundred yards. Then you fellows will open your eyes," said Tom, throwing the big repeater to his shoulder.

"I'm afraid we'll be waiting for the goose that never comes," remarked Thad, inspecting some of the shells that Frank had brought with him. "How much powder, Frank?" holding up one of the shells.

"Those with fine shot have three and a half drams of the best powder, and the coarse shot, four drams."

"I wish there were lots of big game, like bear, panther, deer, and so forth," said Tom.

"We'll probably kill more 'and so forth' than anything else," remarked Thad.

"I'll be satisfied with the 'and so forth' part of it," said Dick.

“Say, boys, what kind of an animal is that standing over on the bank watching us?” said Frank suddenly.

“Boys, I believe that’s a wolf,” said Tom.

“I wonder if it is? It don’t seem to be afraid of us,” remarked Thad.

“It’s a wolf sure, and I’m going to try it a whirl with the 45,” said Tom excitedly.

“Don’t make a mistake now and shoot somebody’s dog or you may get into trouble. Bruno don’t seem to smell anything,” remarked Dick, patting the intelligent animal’s head.

“That’s no dog,” replied Tom; and throwing in a shell and stepping softly to the door, he raised the rifle to his shoulder.

An instant later a sharp report rang out, and the boys saw the leaves and dirt fly under the animal’s belly.

The “wolf” made a bound to one side and stood looking mildly around as if to discover the cause of the trouble. Tom hastily threw in another shell and was about to raise the rifle to his shoulder again, when a man stepped in view, and shaking his fist at the boat, bawled out:

“Say, there, you gosh blamed fools, what you shootin’ at my dog fur?”

“You are in for it now, Tom,” said Frank with a grin.

“In for nothing, I ain’t afraid of him,” replied Tom, and making a funnel of his hands he shouted back: “We thought it was a wolf.”

The owner of the canine, after contemplating his animal a moment, seemed to think it resembled a wolf sufficiently to make the explanation satisfactory, for he called the dog and they started off up the bank of the river.

"Why didn't you hit him, Tom? Must have had the wolf ague," remarked Thad.

"Probably too close. He didn't agree to hit anything under four hundred yards, and that wasn't over two hundred," chimed in Dick.

"I thought she would shoot over at that distance and held a little under, but I guess it's just as well I didn't kill it," replied Tom, looking relieved.

"There's our landing place, lads. Drop the mains'l; haul in the flying jib; kick over the mizzen; yank the spanker, or I'll spank the yanker," bawled the Commodore.

"The old man is funny this morning, the ham and eggs must have gone to his head," remarked Frank, scrutinizing the mouth of the narrow river a short distance ahead.

"Say, Commodore, how shall we go in there?" he asked, turning to Thad.

"Sideways, like a hog at war, of course. Man the other sweep," called out Commodore Kingston.

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Frank; and, obeying the broad sweeps, the Greased Lightning slowly sidled toward the west bank. In a few moments she slid into the mouth of the small stream and slowly approached the south bank.

"Stand by to snub her, Tom," called out the Commodore.

"Aye, aye, sir," replied that alert sailor, seizing the bowline.

The Greased Lightning grated on the sand, and Tom, springing lightly ashore, soon had the unwieldy craft fast to a tree. As he did so, a quacking, squealing, and fluttering accompanied by a great roar of wings, attracted the boys' attention, and a hundred yards up the little stream a huge flock of mallards, teal, wood-duck, gadwell, and other varieties of wildfowl that had been securely feeding in the mouth of the river, arose and were soon out of sight around a bend.

"Gee, look at the ducks, boys. There's a million!" called out Tom.

"Too bad we didn't know they were there; we could have crawled right on top of them," said Dick regretfully, his eyes lighting up with old time fire as he watched the vanishing ducks.

"Never mind, they will keep. Lower the staging," shouted Thad, as he sprang ashore and made fast the sternline.

As the "staging" was only a two-inch plank, it was soon in shape and the boys stood on shore taking in their surroundings. They were in the mouth of a little river perhaps forty yards in width. A great forest that had evidently never known the ax of the woodman, stretched up and down the Mississippi and away toward the

setting sun, how far they knew not. Huge trees, the foliage of which almost met in mid-stream, sheltered the mouth of the diminutive river, making a secure and cozy resting-place for the Greased Lightning.

"Boys, how do you like the outlook for fur, fin, and feather?" asked Thad, as they stood on the bank and surveyed the surroundings.

"It suits me all right so far. Of course we can tell more about it after we explore the country a little," replied Tom.

"We have seen the feathers, and we know the fins are in the water, and I guess we will find *some* fur, anyhow," said Frank.

"Say, Commodore, now we are on land we can help boss and jaw back, can't we?" inquired Dick.

"Yep. You can cook, wash the dishes, and jaw all you want to. I'm going to kill a mess of ducks for supper," replied Thad.

"All right. Tom can cook, Frank wash the dishes, and I'll jaw," said Dick.

"And eat," remarked Thad, as he disappeared in the cabin. In a few moments he reappeared with gun and rubber boots, and said:

"Say, boys, one of you come with me and we'll explore this stream a ways and look for places to set the traps; the other two can chop some wood and get things fixed for a camp. What do you say?"

"All right. Take Frank along, and Dick and I will do the chores," replied Tom.

“Get your gun, Frank, and come on and we’ll do the exploring act,” said Thad.

“I’m going to take the little 22 and bring home some squirrels for supper,” observed Frank, starting for the houseboat. “Say, Thad, what are you wearing your rubber boots for?” he called out as he reached the door.

“Oh, I thought we might find a creek or pond to cross and then the boots will come in handy,” explained Thad.

“Why don’t you take the small skiff and row up the river so you can land on either side?” suggested Tom.

“Maybe that would be a pious idea. What do you say, Frank, shall we take the skiff and row up the river?” inquired Thad, as Frank came out with his hip boots on, carrying the 22.

“Of course. I never thought of that. Then we can examine both banks better for places to set the traps,” replied Frank in a business-like way.

A moment later the boys were in the smaller skiff and Frank, after placing the rifle on the forward seat beside him, picked up the oars and remarked:

“I’ll row, and you keep your eye out for muskrat and mink sign.”

“That strikes me favorably, and I’ll also smash the first duck that tries to pass; that’s my specialty,” said Thad, seating himself comfortably in the stern with the gun across his lap.

"Your specialty is most anything that doesn't require much work," observed Dick with a grin.

"Now, Dicky, don't give your brother away that way or I'll tell the boys how you sprinted down the hill when you thought the skeleton was after you, once upon a time," replied Thad, as Frank bent to the oars.

"Don't you two babes in the woods get lost; and remember, lunch is ready at noon," and Tom, picking up the ax, commenced looking around for dry wood.

"Got your pocket compass?" called Dick, making a funnel of his hands.

A vigorous nod from both boys and they disappeared around a bend.

"Say, Thad, I'll bet this is a dandy place to catch black bass; see the minnows jumping along shore," said Frank in a low voice, as they quietly glided up the stream.

"Yes, and I see them jumping along ahead of us in half a dozen places. No danger of running short of fresh meat here, and if we don't find plenty of mink and muskrats, to say nothing of coon and other varmints, I'll be greatly fooled," replied Thad.

"How is Bruno on coon? Did you ever try him?" asked Frank.

"I think not; but he will tree them all right, never fear. That dog knows more than any dog I ever saw. Sometimes I think he is more than half human. Why, Dick and I have had

him retrieve ducks for half a day on the bottoms, and then knock off and go over in the woods after squirrels. After we got in the timber we would say: 'We are after squirrels now, Bruno; find one.' And, sir, do you know that critter seemed to take in the situation in a minute. He would canter around through the woods, and in almost no time have a squirrel treed. And he would hold him there for half a day if necessary till we came."

"Why didn't we think to bring him along?" said Frank, surveying the bank on either side.

"Oh, there is time enough for that. We just want to see what the river looks like, and if there are any lakes near by. See!" Thad continued, "there are two muskrat holes and there is another on that side; and say, Frank, I just saw a mink skip up the bank into the woods ahead."

"That's jolly. We'll catch a boat-load of fur," said Frank, bending to the oars with renewed vigor.

"Stop rowing a minute and sit perfectly still," said Thad in a low voice a moment later with glistening eyes.

Frank complied, and sat watching Thad as he slowly brought the gun to his shoulder and pointed it up stream on the left side of his companion. Suddenly his face dropped to the stock quick as a flash and two reports rang out in quick succession.

Frank turned and saw a pair of blue-winged teal twenty yards above, drifting down to meet them.

"Good double; but why didn't you wait until they passed? I thought that was the proper way," remarked Frank, as they picked up the two plump teal and went on.

"Too much trouble to go back after them, although if we had been standing on shore I should anyhow; but this was a head-on shot, one of the easiest in the world after you once catch the knack," replied Thad, as he blew the smoke from his gun and slipped in fresh shells.

"You and Dick can shoot all around Tom and me on ducks," remarked Frank half regretfully.

"Oh, I don't know. If we do, I'll agree not to brag about it. Maybe you and Tom will shoot all around us with a rifle," replied Thad, laughing.

"I practiced considerable in the shooting galleries at home before I started, but maybe I won't be able to hit anything out in the woods," said Frank.

"There is a chance to try your skill. See that squirrel in the big shellbark on the right bank?" observed Thad.

Frank picked up the rifle and turned in the direction indicated. "Where is he?"

"See him, out on that limb. He imagines we can't see him because his body is hidden."

"Ah, yes; I see the gentleman now," and Frank quietly raised his rifle. The clear, tiny crack followed.

"Never budged him; try again," said Thad.

"Land quietly and let me step out. The boat is too unsteady," replied Frank.

A moment later he stood on the bank and again raised the rifle. At the report, a gray and red body came crashing down through the crimson and yellow leaves.

"Got your work in that trip, old man. Guess you won't have much trouble holding up your end with the rifle; shot square through the head, that's the way to knock 'em," said Thad admiringly.

Frank laughed and flushed slightly with gratified pride as he replied: "I ought to have killed that fellow the first shot I suppose, but I never had any experience shooting out of a boat. It wobbles so, I couldn't hit a haystack."

"Suppose we leave the skiff here and take a scout out through the woods. There ought to be some lakes around here somewhere," said Thad.

Accordingly the skiff was securely tied, and after carefully noting various prominent landmarks, the boys boldly plunged into the forest to the north. They had gone perhaps two hundred yards when Thad cried out: "I see water ahead; there's a lake, sure enough."

Cautiously threading their way through the

dense woods, the boys were soon within fifty yards of the south end of the lake and, securely hidden by a thick growth of willows and saplings, surveyed the scene. It was a beautiful, enchanting picture, one dear to the heart of every sportsman.

Before them lay a small lake perhaps sixty yards in width and three hundred in length, surrounded by a tall, dense forest, now brilliant with crimson, yellow, green, and brown foliage. In fact it seemed that every color of the rainbow was represented in making up the gorgeous colorings with which Nature loves to deck our Northern forests in autumn. The blue waters of the lake lay calm as a mirror in the soft, hazy sunshine that filtered through the smoky film of Indian summer.

But it was the surface of the little sheet of water, however, that quickly caught the boys' attention and caused Thad's eyes to dance and sparkle with a radiant longing. Dotted its entire length were hundreds of wildfowl of almost every variety that migrates up and down the broad Mississippi. Stately mallards preened themselves on the banks or hunted industriously for acorns in the water; hundreds of blue and green-winged teal were strung along the shore, contentedly shoveling about in the shallow water and mud where their favorite food was to be found. Groups of brilliantly colored spoon-bills were standing on their heads, their broad

bills far under water in an eager search for something to eat, while their red legs vigorously fanned the air in a ludicrous fashion, as they frantically endeavored to hold the rebellious end under water. Gadwells, pintails, widgeons, bluebills, all were represented. Bunches, pairs, and singles, the wildfowl were scattered over the lake in reckless abandon.

A hundred yards from where the boys were concealed, four Canada geese swam about majestically, occasionally dipping their bills daintily in the water as though not quite sure that they wanted any of that kind of food. Probably they had spent the night in some grainfield and were there simply to digest a rich breakfast of wheat.

"Isn't that a sight for the gods, Frank?" whispered Thad, after they had drunk in the scene for a brief but ecstatic moment.

"Gee! But I should say so! I would give a hundred dollar bill to have papa here and take this in; ducks, woods, colors, lake, and everything," whispered Frank in a burst of admiration.

"Can you pick off that biggest Canada with the 22 from here?" whispered Thad.

"I think I can if I don't get the goose ague. The gun will hold up that far, I know," replied Frank with a grin.

"Try him a whirl, anyhow. You won't get the goose ague."

Frank threw up the peep sights and taking careful aim through a small opening in the leaves, pressed the trigger. At the report, the big goose sprang into the air but fell back instantly; the long, sinuous neck moved to and fro a few times and the big gander lay motionless on the water. A warning honk came from its mates, and they arose from the water and with a continuous gabbling raised their heavy bodies over the timber and started for the Mississippi.

The report of the rifle had been so slight that only the ducks nearest the youthful hunters took the alarm. These flew up the lake a short distance and again dropped into the water, looking about in a half frightened way as if wondering what the trouble was.

"Good shot. Bully boy. Tom and his big 45 will have to get a hump on themselves to beat that," and Thad gave his comrade an approving slap on the back.

"I'm pretty tickled my own self, and doubly glad I didn't get the goose ague," replied Frank with a blush and a laugh, as he inserted a fresh shell.

"So am I. But if you had, we wouldn't have told the boys; they would have roasted you the rest of the trip," said Thad.

"Shall we try to kill any of these ducks?" inquired Frank.

"Wise remark. Sensible boy. Shows you have had the right bringing up. Most chaps of

your age would want to go ahead and kill every duck on the lake without asking any questions, or giving a thought as to whether we could use them or not," observed Thad sagely. "I don't think we had better kill many more. We can eat only so many and we had better shoot them as we want them. Let's make a circuit of the lake and see what kind of tracks we find on the shore in the mud."

As the boys stepped out from their place of concealment and started up the lake, the ducks arose like a wave ahead of them. The wildfowl were very tame, flocks of blue-wing teal dashing past them not twenty yards away.

"Go it, my beauties, we'll need some of you every day," laughed Thad, as the ducks swept past them in the most tantalizing fashion.

"Gee, Thad, look at the tracks. There isn't anything *but* tracks here in the mud," observed Frank enthusiastically.

"Yes. There's mink, muskrat, coon, and goodness knows what else. This must be a favorite stamping ground," replied Thad, examining the various footprints.

The boys soon came opposite the big goose floating on the water.

"The next question is, can we get him?" said Frank, surveying his kill.

"We've *got* to get him if we swim for it. It won't be the first time I've swam for a duck or goose when I had no dog," replied Thad.

"It's a little mite chilly, and I prefer to wade if possible," grinned Frank, as he pulled up his long boots to the limit and started into the water.

Carefully feeling his way, he got within twelve feet of the big gander and halted. "Too bad. So near and yet so far," he observed, turning to Thad with a comical look.

"Hold on. I'll fix you out in a minute," cried Thad, running up the bank. In an instant he came back with a long, lithe sapling the size of a fishpole, and wading out handed it to Frank. "Can you reach him with that?"

"Easy," was the rejoinder, as Frank slowly pulled the goose toward him and waded ashore. "Lots of ways to skin a cat. I was within three-sixteenths of an inch of the top of my boots."

"That's a trick I learned long ago," rejoined Thad.

The boys made the circuit of the lake, carefully noting the muskrat runs, tracks, and coon "sign." They were around near the lower end of the lake again and stood on the bank a moment contemplating in silence the beauties of the scene. Just then a dozen blue-winged teal, closely bunched, dashed past. It was too much for Thad.

"We might take home a few more ducks, I suppose," he remarked without moving.

"You want to get a move on you if you take any out of that flock," rejoined Frank.

"I'll cut a hole through them all right," said Thad confidently.

The bunch was twenty yards past before he made a move. Suddenly there was a flash of steel, a single report, and four ducks were in the water, three dead and one winged. Another charge of shot swept across the water and the wounded bird lay dead.

"You and Dick and your father certainly have the easiest, surest, and most graceful way of shooting I ever saw," observed Frank, as Thad pulled up his boots preparatory to wading out after the ducks.

"You will catch the hang of it after awhile. All we know we learned of papa," replied Thad.

"Say, Commodore, it is after eleven o'clock. Hadn't we better be pointing toward home?" remarked Frank, looking at his watch as Thad waded in with the four teal.

"I suspect so. Tom will have a fit if we don't show up for lunch."

"We've found places enough already to set most of our traps, haven't we?" inquired Frank.

"Yes, and we haven't been over a tenth of the ground, but we've seen enough to know it is a good place to hunt and trap, and we promised to be back by noon, so we might as well be moseying," replied Thad, as he led the way around the end of the lake.

As the boys struck into the woods on their way back to the boat, they made a detour to the left to see if there were any more lakes near the river in that direction. They soon entered a low swale that ran in the direction they were going, and Thad, like an old hunter, instinctively glanced at the soft, moist ground for woodcock boring.

"Look here, Frank, at the plugging. And it's fresh, too. I'll just slip in some 9's, and maybe we'll have broiled woodcock for supper."

Thad broke his gun and extracted the duck shells, and that instant a big autumn woodcock flashed up at his feet and dashed into the woods.

"You won't broil that fellow very much," laughed Frank, shifting his big goose to the other shoulder.

"Let the next gent try that game and I'll show you," retorted Thad with a determined air, as he snapped the gun together.

Another whistling flash of brown; a sharp report—and the fleeing woodcock dropped in the swale.

Thad killed four out of five and handed the gun to Frank. "Here, try your luck."

"Pshaw; I couldn't hit one of those streaks in a week," observed Frank, exchanging guns reluctantly.

"You never will learn until you try. Don't shut your left eye, and imagine you are shooting a rifle, with plenty of time. Throw the gun

on them as near as you can, and whale away, hit or miss," said Thad.

Frank tried to obey instructions, and succeeded in knocking off a peck of autumn leaves a little before their time. Three times he did the same thing. The fourth woodcock went straight down the swale almost a tail-ender. Frank took careful aim and dropped it at fifty yards.

"I'll quit now while my credit's good," he remarked with a grin, handing the gun to Thad.

"You try to get too good aim. You must learn to snap shoot on these fellows, as they are into the brush out of sight in an instant, generally," remarked Thad, taking the shotgun.

The boys were not far from where they left the boat, when Thad, glancing up, stopped and caught Frank's arm. "Hold on, I see something."

"What is it?" cried Frank eagerly.

"Look at that fellow up in that big oak," said Thad, pointing to a tree isolated from the others.

"I see it. What is it, a wildcat?" inquired Frank.

"No; it's a big coon. There is your chance to draw first blood in the fur department," said Thad.

Frank laid down the goose and raised the rifle.

"Through the head now, remember, or you get thirty days," said Thad. The little rifle

cracked, and the coon came tumbling to the ground with a thump that jarred the earth.

"I guess we had better let you do the rifle shooting," said Thad, as they picked up the coon and started for the boat again.

"Perhaps, but I'll hit something with the shotgun yet."

On the way to the boat, Frank shot three more squirrels, making in all quite a respectable load of game.

"Look at the big shellbark hickory nuts, and they are all right to shuck, too," remarked Thad, when they were within a few yards of the boat, stopping under a hickory and picking up a hickory nut almost as large as a Bartlett pear.

Thad filled one of the pockets of his hunting coat with nuts to show Tom and Dick; then they loaded their game into the boat and leisurely started down the little river.

"I guess the boys have dinner ready, I see they have a fire going," remarked Frank, who was in the stern.

"You can bet Dick will see to the dinner," replied Thad with a grin.

"Houseboat ahoy!" cried Frank when they were within a few yards of their floating home.

"Ahoy your own self. What luck?" and "Hello! Did you two infants get back safe?" from Tom and Dick in a breath.

"Of course we got back safe and had all kinds of luck," replied Thad, as they climbed out.

"Geese, ducks, woodcock, squirrel, and coon. I should say you *did* find something. You fellows are all right, and have earned your dinner," remarked Tom, looking down into the bottom of the skiff.

"Gee, Tom. We'll have a variety now, sure," said Dick, as the boys handed up the game.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," announced Tom, as they all went into the cabin.

While they discussed the meal with youthful appetites, Thad and Frank told of what they had seen and done.

"So Frank is a dead shot with the rifle, eh?" said Tom, glancing quizzically across the table as he stirred his coffee.

"That's what he is. He's a dead shot from way back, and if you don't mind your eye he'll kill more with the little 22 than you will with the 45," replied Thad promptly, as he vigorously attacked the viands.

"I'm not half as dead as Thad is with the shotgun, especially on woodcock. I would just as soon try to hit a rubber ball on the bounce," replied Frank.

"Did you see many of them?" asked Dick, passing his cup for more coffee.

"The swale we came down was full of them and I suppose there are lots of other places just as good," said Thad.

"Your Uncle Timothy will have to show you

how to kill woodcock, proper," remarked Dick complaisantly.

"Are you a woodcock shot, too?" inquired Frank innocently, knowing nothing of Dick's nagging Thad about their first experience.

"Ask Thad," replied Dick, winking at his brother.

Thad dropped his knife and fork and lifting his finger impressively, said: "Now look here, Dick Kingston, you are my dear brother and I love you, except when you switch over on the subject of woodcock. I want to warn you right here that if you persist in dragging in that dod-blamed old, frayed-out yarn with more embellishments, about killing accidentally that woodcock at Long Lake, I'll—I'll throw you to the fishes."

"I'll go you one better and throw the fishes to you; come here," said Dick with a good natured grin, arising from the table and lifting the cover from a pan. The boys crowded around, and Frank, forgetting all about woodcock, cried out: "Christopher Columbus! If there aren't four of the finest black bass I ever set my peepers on. Gee, aren't they beauties. Where did you catch them?"

"Oh, Tom and I weren't asleep if we did stay at home and do the drudgery," said Dick, going back to his interrupted dinner.

"I should say not. Did you weigh them?" remarked Frank.

"Sure thing. They averaged a strong three pounds apiece, didn't they, Tom? Small mouth, too."

"Dick is giving it to you straight, boys," said Tom.

"That is my game," exclaimed Frank enthusiastically. "I would rather capture one of those fellows than eat strawberry shortcake when I'm hungry."

"Well, that depends. I like to fish, but I like strawberry shortcake, too," observed Dick.

"No remarks are necessary on that score. We know you," said Thad.

"Tell me where you caught them and I'll agree to fill you up with bass clear to the neck," said Frank.

"Hold on, Frank. Don't make any rash promises. You couldn't fill him up if you fished steady until it froze, and kept Tom cooking all the time," said Thad.

"Go ahead, Frank, and I'll back you. I'll put half a pound of salt on every fish and we'll finally fill him up on river water," laughed Tom.

"It's a shame the way I'm abused about eating. I think I'm a small eater," said Dick trying to assume an injured air.

"It depends on what class you go in," said Thad. "You eat a little more than a horse and not quite as much as a rhinoceros."

"Well, say, boys, not to change the subject,

hadn't we better get a move on us and set the traps this afternoon?" said Tom, springing up from the table.

"That's the talk. I second the motion," cried Frank.

It was finally agreed that Thad and Tom should set traps over the route the boys had been in the morning, leaving Frank and Dick to wash the dishes and set things to rights, and then skirmish where they pleased.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPING.

After Thad and Tom had loaded the traps into the boat and started up the river, Frank and Dick fell to and washed the dishes and straightened things to rights. Then Frank remarked:

“I suppose it would be a good idea to clean some of this game.”

“I guess we had better. The boys don’t expect us to, so we will surprise them. Lucky we filled the icebox with ice from the Mountain Belle. It will help keep our game so much longer, and it won’t melt very fast now, especially here in the shade of these great trees; it is like being under an umbrella,” observed Dick.

First they skinned the raccoon and stretched the pelt properly. Then the squirrels, woodcock, goose, and ducks were attended to.

“Gee, but ain’t these teal fat? They’re just like balls of butter. Say, Frank; pick your duck the other way. Pick toward the tail and then

you won't be so apt to tear the skin if the bird is young and tender."

"Correct. When I don't do things right, just tell me. I'm a tenderfoot and have to learn," replied Frank, changing ends with the duck.

It was quite a job cleaning all of the game, and the afternoon was well spent when the boys finished their self-appointed task.

"How do you like this kind of a trip?" asked Dick after they had washed their hands and were resting.

"I think it is just grand. You and Thad don't know what you have got, living out in the country where the fishing, hunting, and trapping; the woods and lakes and birds are right under your noses. I tell you what, it gets mighty monotonous, hearing the rumble and roar of street cars and staring at miles of brick and stone every day of your life. Of course, they tuck in a little dinky park here and there, but it is about the size of a washtub and laid out exactly by rule as though it was made to order, like a suit of clothes. It gets tiresome. It isn't much like the scenery along the old Mississippi by a long shot. I've just been aching for a trip of this kind."

"Seems to me I wouldn't like living in a big city, either," remarked Dick.

"You would have to live there if your folks did. Papa has been thinking of buying a place out in the country, for he likes to hunt and fish

as well as I do. I shouldn't be surprised if he got one along the Mississippi. I hope he will. If he does, I'll spend more time out here than I do in New York, you may be sure."

"This country suits me all right," remarked Dick contentedly. "But say, Frank," he continued, "I promised to show you where I caught those big bass."

"That's so, and we haven't much time, either," replied Frank, springing energetically to his feet.

"Come on then. We'll take the minnow seine and catch a few minnows out on this little bar," said Dick going into the cabin after the seine.

One haul furnished all the minnows needed. These the boys placed in a minnow bucket, and Dick said:

"Ready, now. It's about two hundred yards down along the main shore. Hold on. We had better tie Bruno up at the houseboat to watch it, although I don't suppose anything will bother. Come on, Bruno." Bruno submitted patiently to being tied, and only cast a beseeching look, supplemented by a mournful whine, after the boys as they trudged off down the river.

"Now walk easy and talk low, bass are the easiest thing frightened in the world," remarked Dick.

"I know it. I've fished for them a good bit," replied Frank.

"It's getting pretty late in the season, too.

We won't catch them much longer, especially if it turns cold," said Dick, stopping to hold a bended sapling for Frank to pass.

A moment later he whispered, "Here is the place. The bass lie under the bank."

Where the boys stood, the bank was perpendicular to the river four or five feet below, whose waters were deep and still with a stiff current. A hundred yards from shore ran a long, narrow wooded island now fast crimsoning with the hues of autumn.

"Don't let your reel click," whispered Dick, as they rapidly jointed the rods.

Frank hooked a big, frisky minnow and, quietly dropping it over the bank, trolled it gently along within a few inches of shore. An instant later there was a commotion in the still waters, a boiling swirl, as a bass made a dash for its supper. Dick saw a quick wrist movement and knew that the fight was on; he thereupon suspended operations and became an interested spectator of the battle.

Here and there, in and out, the fierce, fighting bass tried every known antic to free its jaws from the obnoxious hook, but in vain. The young angler was alert and handled his rod like a veteran.

A few vindictive rushes, and the bass failing to get free grew sulky and "wouldn't play," causing Frank to wonder what the next dodge would be. A slight tightening of the line caused

the bass to change its mind, and then came an unusually vicious rush, ending with a wild leap for freedom. Straight for the clouds went the big fish, shaking its head at the height of its leap as a terrier shakes a rat.

"No use to try that dodge, old man, I'm onto you," muttered Frank grimly.

"Keep a taut line, Frank. If you lose him I'll lick you," cried Dick, beginning to get excited.

But even a big bass will get tired after a while, and Frank began to look about for the best way to land his quarry. A few yards below, the bank dropped to within a foot of the water, and thither the young angler led his tired fish, whispering to Dick: "Have the landing net ready now."

In less time than it takes to tell it, the gamy fish lay along shore. Dick slipped the landing net under it and, lying on the ground, it gasped a last defiance at its captors.

"It was worth coming clear from New York for that fight," said Frank, surveying the magnificent proportions of his catch with a satisfied look.

"He's a beauty and no mistake," replied Dick. "But say, Frank, although I would like to wet a line, I believe we ought to go back and start supper. It is getting late and the boys will be tired and hungry. What do you say?"

"I'm agreeable. We know where they are now."

On their return to the houseboat everything was quiet and Bruno dozing lightly.

"Thad and Tom haven't showed up yet," said Dick, unlocking the door and untieing the delighted Bruno. "Now what shall we have for supper? Tom is cook, but we'll start things going."

"Better have the woodcock for supper and the bass for breakfast, hadn't we?" said Frank, putting away his split bam'boo.

"That hits me," was the reply; and when Thad and Tom returned they found supper well under way; the tea-kettle singing merrily, and the birds ready to broil.

"Hello. This smells cozy. We were wondering if you lads would have gumption enough to start supper. Whew, I'm tired," said Thad, throwing himself into a chair.

"You will discover before you get through with us that we have gumption enough for anything. Go over and take a peep at that *Microp-terus Dolomieu* that Frank caught," replied Dick, as he put the stovelid under the steaming tea-kettle.

"The what?" asked Tom in amazement, looking around the cabin.

"Oh, excuse me. I thought you knew a thing or two, but I see you are a dunderhead, like everybody else," observed Dick. "I mean that big bass over there."

"Don't make any more cracks like that,

young fellow, or I'll take a fall out of you and eat your woodcock in the bargain," replied Tom severely.

"I don't mind about the fall, but please don't eat my woodcock, for I'm hungry."

"Gee, ain't he a thumper. What does he weigh?" inquired Tom.

"Tell you later," said Dick, hooking the scales into the fish's gill. "Just three and a quarter. One quarter better than mine."

"Did you get the traps set all right?" Frank asked.

"Everything is in shipshape, and loaded for bear. We expect a boatload of fur in the morning," replied Thad.

After supper Tom said: "Come on, Thad. Get out the chess board and try your favorite Evans' gambit on me. Dick and Frank can take the other board and see who is the best man in the kindergarten game."

"Huh, smarty," scornfully retorted Dick, who was quite conceited over his abilities as a chess player.

The quartet played chess until Dick, while waiting for Frank to move, yawned so amply that Tom cried out:

"For Heaven's sake, Dick, the next time you yawn that way, hang a lambrequin over your mouth. I could see what you had for supper."

"Or a tablecloth," suggested Thad.

"I'm going to bed," said Dick. "Frank is in

such a tight hole he can't get out without losing his queen. Give it up, Frank, and let's go to bed."

"All right; I'm no good."

"Mate," called Thad. "Kingston brothers get first blood on chess."

"I had you beaten if I hadn't been so sleepy," replied Tom as he prepared for bed.

"Of course. That's what Dick always claims when I beat him."

"You don't beat Dick any oftener than he does you, my son. So stop bragging and go to bed," retorted that individual from the bedroom.

The next morning Dick opened his eyes, stretched, until he almost loosened some of his joints, gave a prodigious yawn, and remarked:

"Come, Frank, roll out. The early bird gets the worm, and it's after sunrise. Hello! Frank isn't here. Say, boys, has my partner got over into your bunk?"

"Nope. Haven't seen or heard a thing of him," replied Tom, springing out of bed and beginning to dress.

"Maybe he has gone out to take a plunge bath in the Mississippi," observed Thad, who had awakened and was yawning and dressing.

All at once Tom raised his head in a listening attitude.

"Hark. I thought I heard a cry; it sounded like 'help.' " He stepped to the door and flung

it open. As he did so, the boys heard faintly but unmistakably the cry: "Help! Help!"

Instantly the quick witted Dick cried out:

"I'll tell you what the matter is. Frank has gone after those bass and fallen in the river. Hurry up, boys. Come on, Bruno," and Dick, hatless and coatless, dashed out of the cabin and down through the woods in the direction of the place where he and Frank were fishing the evening before.

He had not taken ten steps when a canine meteor shot past him and Bruno dashed ahead.

Tom caught up a short coil of half-inch rope that was lying on deck, and he and Thad sprang ashore and swiftly followed.

"Sprint, Tom, if you ever did," cried Thad, as they dashed along, leaping logs and dodging bushes.

Their longer legs and greater strength carried them to Dick ere he was half way there. "Straight ahead; right down there," cried Dick, pointing in the direction of the fishing grounds, as Thad and Tom went by.

When they arrived on the bank a strange scene was presented to their gaze. Ten feet from the steep bank, out in the deep, cold waters of the Mississippi was Bruno, gallantly swimming for shore while Frank, his head just above water, was clinging to the shaggy hair on the brave dog's back.

"The dog don't seem to make any headway.

What's the matter Frank?" cried Thad anxiously.

"My foot is fast in a snag. Hurry up, boys, I'm about gone," called Frank faintly.

"Quick, Thad! Take this end of the rope," shouted Tom, and a second later he leaped into the river. Catching Frank by the arm he cried: "Now pull."

Thad pulled until he threatened to disjoint Tom's or Frank's arm, but in vain, the old death-trap beneath the water held fast and refused to yield up its prey.

"No use, Tom. My foot is there for keeps. Don't drown yourself trying to save me; I can't keep my head above water much longer," said Frank in a weak, exhausted voice.

"I'll see that your head is kept above water as long as mine is," replied Tom grimly.

Bruno, loosened from Frank's grasp, was swimming about evidently wondering what the matter was. At this juncture Dick came running up to the bank.

"Here, Dick, jump out here quick and hold Frank up while I dive down and loosen his foot. It's caught in a snag," called Tom.

Without an instant's hesitation, Dick leaped into the river, and held Frank up by vigorously treading water. Then Tom, a regular eel in the water, disappeared beneath the surface of the river. It seemed to Thad, standing on the bank, rope in hand ready to pull, and every

nerve on edge, that Tom was under water a quarter of an hour. As the seconds glided by and Tom did not appear, the suspense became almost agonizing. Thoughts of their trip flashed through Thad's mind. What a congenial party they were, and what a happy, jolly time they were having. And now it was all to end with the tragic death of one or more of their number. He was in that state of mind when every second is a minute, and every minute an hour.

Just as he had made up his mind that Tom had also been fastened beneath the water and drowned, a few bubbles appeared on the surface. Then Tom's head popped up; there was a mighty snort as he exploded the air from his lungs and said:

"There, it's loose now. Pull us in down at that low place."

The revulsion in Thad's feelings, the intense relief and delight he felt at seeing Tom and hearing him say that Frank was free, made him feel that he could pull a tree up by the roots if necessary; and he pulled Tom, Frank, Dick, and Bruno in to the low bank and helped them out of the water, wishing they weighed a ton or two more so he could exert himself and work off his surplus energy.

"Gee, boys. I'm chilled through and weak as a cat," said Frank, as he lay on the ground and breathed a sigh of relief through his chattering teeth.

“Bear a hand, Thad, and we’ll carry him to the boat,” said Tom.

“Stand back, I’ll attend to him. I feel tickled enough to carry a cow,” replied Thad; and picking Frank up as though he weighed only ten pounds, he threw him over his shoulder and marched off, while Dick scampered ahead to build a fire.

Thad was half way to the houseboat with his burden when Frank said:

“Hold on, Thad. I can walk now. This jolting has set my blood to circulating again.” And Thad, pretty tired in spite of his superabundance of energy, eased Frank down and took his arm.

On their arrival, Dick had a fire going, the tea-kettle on, and was rapidly changing his wet garments for dry ones. An operation Tom was not slow in following after he and Thad had helped Frank undress, rubbed him with a coarse towel, and put him to bed.

“Now the first thing on the docket is to make Frank a cup of hot, strong coffee, then we’ll all have a good hot breakfast of black bass, bread and butter, coffee and eggs; then I can jump a ten-rail fence,” said Tom briskly, starting to work.

In a short time Frank was outside of a steaming cup of hot coffee, and soon after, Tom announced the fact that breakfast was about ready.

"Boys, did you notice Bruno? He stood by the door for five minutes after we came in, waiting, I suppose, to see if there was anything more for him to do. He has just concluded that everything is all right again and laid down to wait for breakfast," said Thad.

"Bless his old four-legged heart, he is a trump," said Dick, giving his shaggy friend a hug.

"He is a trump, surely. He saved my bacon until you boys came," said Frank, who, invigorated by the coffee, had arisen and was putting on dry clothing. "What will you take for that fellow, Dick? Name your price," he continued as he came out of the bedroom.

"Frank Howard, if you hadn't just been dragged back from a watery grave, I'd lick you for even asking such a question. What would I take for him? What would you take for your mother, or your brother?" replied Dick indignantly.

"Beg your pardon, Dick. It was a fool question to ask. I didn't stop to think. Of course you wouldn't sell him; but remember, Bruno, your new friend will never forget you," replied Frank, his eyes moistening as he stooped to give the brave dog a loving pat.

When they were seated at the breakfast table, Tom said:

"Now tell us how you happened to get in such a queer fix."

“There isn’t much to tell,” replied Frank. “I chanced to awake early, so I thought I would steal a march on you fellows and catch a string of bass before breakfast. I gave Bruno a pat as I went out and told him to keep still. He just tapped the floor two or three times with his tail, and grinned—or seemed to. I think he knew what I was after.”

“By the way, did you catch any fish?” asked Dick.

“Yes, I killed five nice ones, and was just having more fun than anybody, all by myself. I had the sixth one hooked and was playing him when I stepped a little too near the edge of the bank. It happened to be a spot that had washed out underneath, and the next thing I knew it gave way and I was floundering around in twenty feet of cold water. I wasn’t a bit scared for I am a good swimmer, but in kicking about, my foot got caught in that old sunken snag and, pull and twist as I might, it wouldn’t let go. I must have been in the water ten minutes before I yelled, but I was getting so cold and numb that I just simply *had* to do something. I could hardly keep my head above water. Then I heard a crashing through the brush and in a second more, Bruno stood on the bank. I just looked up and said: ‘Help, Bruno, I am drowning.’ And do you know, boys, I believe that dog understood what I said, for he jumped out in the river as Tom and Dick did and I caught

hold of the hair on his neck, and he turned and tried to drag me ashore, but he couldn't phase me."

"No wonder," broke in Tom. "The heel of your shoe was caught in a crotch like a boot-jack and your toe under another limb. A skiff might as well try to tow a raft up stream. Why, I had to break off one of the limbs of the crotch when I was under water before I could loosen your feet."

"How long do you think you were under water, Tom?" asked Thad.

"Oh, I don't suppose it was over a minute."

"It was the longest minute I ever put in. It seemed to me half an hour before you showed up. It wouldn't take many such minutes to put gray hairs on a fellow, waiting as I was," remarked Thad.

"What became of your pole?" Dick inquired.

"I don't know. I never saw it after I went down. If the hook was fastened good, that bass is probably towing it around somewhere out in the Mississippi."

"Well, thank goodness, we are out of the scrape all right. Now, Thad, you and I had better run the traps while Dick washes the dishes, and Frank can rest after his frolic. Then we will all have a skinning bee, provided we catch anything," said Tom, arising from the table.

"That's so. I had forgotten the traps in this

mix-up. Let's get a hump on ourselves," replied Thad, putting on his rubber boots.

"Half the muskrats will have their legs twisted off before you fellows get there," said Dick.

"I guess not. We set the traps so the rats will be pretty sure to drown themselves," replied Tom, who had trapped more than any of the boys and was consequently looked upon as an authority.

"Wonder if we'll need a gun," said Thad.

"Don't suppose we will," replied Tom. "Seems as if we ought to have a gun of some kind, though. This is a strange country and we don't know what we may have in the traps."

"Let's take the 22 along, and if we get a grizzly bear or something too big to kill with a club or the hatchet we can shoot it in the eye," remarked Thad.

"If you find anything too big to kill with a club, you will probably both come shirt-tailing through the woods after Frank and me and the 45," observed Dick.

"Oh, I don't know. We'll risk the 22, anyhow," said Tom, as he climbed into the skiff.

The boys had only a short distance to go up the stream before they came to the first trap, where they took out a muskrat.

"Score one," said Thad, as he threw the rat into the boat and reset the trap in the runway leading into the bank.

Five muskrats and two mink were taken from the traps along the river; then they landed and started for the lake where the balance of the traps were.

"Gee! There are more ducks than ever on the lake," remarked Thad, as they walked out on the shore and started up the lake, the great body of wildfowl arising and circling in all directions as the boys appeared in view.

Most of the traps were sprung or had something in them. Fifteen muskrats, four mink, and two coons the boys took from the traps on their trip around the lake.

"Gee! we've got a load. Wish we didn't have the rifle now," remarked Tom, as they arrived at the foot of the lake again and threw down the back-load of fur to rest a moment.

"We'll make it all right; it isn't far to the boat. We may get another coon on the way back, you know we have four traps in the timber," said Thad.

"That's so," replied Tom, shouldering half of the load that they had tied together with strong twine to facilitate carrying, and starting on.

Sure enough, the first two traps each held a raccoon.

"If we find many more, we will have to make two trips, if it *isn't* far,—we're loaded to the guards now," said Tom, as he put a quietus to the coon in the second trap.



Dick's horse has balked again," said Tom
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The third trap was unsprung. The last trap had been set in a ditch or gully near the mouth of a hole in the bank. As the boys neared it, they heard a rustling and the clank of the chain. Tom stopped.

"Hold on, Thad. We've got something, and it isn't a coon either. It's an ugly-looking customer."

"What is it?" asked Thad, peering through the bushes.

"I can't tell for sure. Whatever it is, it has come the full length of the chain to meet us."

The boys eased down their burden and stepped to where they could get a good view of the animal. At sight of the tawny, dirty, gray hide, the supple, sinewy legs, both boys recognized it at a glance. They had seen many of the same species in the rocky bluffs at home.

"It's an old tom wildcat," said Thad.

"Yes, and he is a whale, the biggest one I ever saw. And say, Thad, the trap only has him by the toes of one hind leg. If we try to kill him with a club he may pull loose. I'm going to shoot him," said Tom, cocking the rifle.

"All right; paste him. It's the quickest way, anyhow."

An instant later a 22 bullet crashed into one of the glaring yellow eyes and passed clean through the head. The head merely quivered as the cat sank to the ground and remained motionless for a few seconds; then an upward

leap as the reaction came, and for a brief time the boys witnessed a series of ground and lofty tumbling that would have shamed an acrobat. When its struggles had ceased and it lay motionless, the boys walked up and examined the homely beast.

"See; the foot was caught fairly, and the critter has pulled and twisted until only two toes are in the trap," remarked Tom.

"That's so. A little while longer, and we would have had a few reminders in the way of a few hairs and a toe or two," replied Thad.

"Gee, he's nearly as long as I am; I'll bet he would make a nasty fight," said Tom, holding their prey up by the hind leg after they had taken it from the trap.

Both boys were glad when the river was reached and their burden deposited in the boat.

"Jocks, but my shoulders ache. That was a big load I'm telling you," remarked Thad, twisting his shoulders about to get them in a natural position again.

"If we are going to catch this amount every morning, we will take more help along," said Tom, seating himself and taking the oars.

They arrived at the boat without any mishap, and Frank and Dick, hearing the dip of oars, came out with the usual salutation:

"Hello. What luck?"

"Oh, just middling. We have work enough for you lads to do the balance of the day," replied Thad climbing on deck.

"Rats, mink, coon, and what's that big gray critter with his eye knocked out?" asked Dick, eyeing the catch.

"Wildcat. Don't you recognize an old friend? Had to plunk him in the eye with the 22. Only had him by two toes. I'll have to admit the 22 is all right, Dick." said Tom.

"Of course it is. I know a good thing when I see it," said Dick, looking wise.

"Does it make you think of old times, when you went down the bluff a mile a minute to get away from that old skeleton in the cave?" inquired Thad with a wink.

"Yep. To tell the truth, it does," admitted Dick candidly, "and if I had been in Tom's place I would have put a bullet in the other eye just for old times' sake, to pay for the scare that cat gave me in the cave. But that don't alter the fact that dinner is almost ready and I'm hungry."

"Did you go and get your bass that you left on the bank when you took your bath this morning, Frank?" inquired Thad, as he was taking off his rubber boots and getting ready for dinner.

"Yes, we got 'em," interposed Dick. "I tied a rope to Frank's leg and took Bruno along. I didn't want to get dinner alone."

"A person would think I needed a guardian to hear you talk," Frank observed.

"Well, what *would* a person naturally sup-

pose, to have a fellow go fishing and fall off the dry ground into the river? But come now, and stop jawing about it, dinner is ready," said Dick.

After dinner the boys got to work in earnest, skinning, stretching, and fleshing their fur; an operation that consumed the better part of the afternoon, for our young trappers were not experts by any means. After a tilt at chess in the evening they retired and slept the sleep that comes from outdoor life in the health-giving woods.

The following morning, not knowing but the catch might prove as large as the previous day, Thad, Tom, and Frank went to attend the traps, leaving Dick to do the work around camp and prepare dinner.

About half past eleven the boys returned. As they touched the houseboat, a round, chubby face, streaming with perspiration, and looking very much perplexed, appeared in the doorway.

"I'm awful glad you've come, Tom. You're head cook. I'm in a dickens of a mess. Something is the matter with this rice we've got," Dick announced anxiously.

"What's the tip now?" asked Tom, climbing on board.

"Why, you see," explained Dick, leading the way into the cabin, "I thought I would cook some rice and give you fellows a treat. The

book said to take a cupful, but I thought, shucks, what's a cup of rice to four people when they're hungry; it wouldn't be a spoonful apiece, and I knew we would all be hungry as bears; so I put on two cupfuls apiece, and pretty soon the stuff began to swell and swell and overflow the pan. I've been dipping out rice for half an hour and still it swells. What do you suppose is the matter with the blamed stuff? I've got rice enough here for a hotel," said Dick, pointing to the various dishes of the half-cooked vegetable on the table.

Tom, who had done considerable cooking for a youth of his age, took one look at the cause of Dick's woes, and collapsing in a chair, held his sides and roared with laughter.

"Say, boys, come in here and see what this muttonhead has been doing; cooked eight cups of rice. O Dicky, Dicky Kingston, but you're a peach from Peachtown. I must embrace you," and Tom, throwing his arms around Dick's neck, put one leg over the youthful cook's shoulder and tried to climb on his back.

"Get off, you big monkey, before I stick this fork into you," remonstrated Dick, freeing himself from his tormentor.

"You goose, didn't you know rice swells up about four hundred times while cooking?" asked Thad, surveying the vast quantities of steaming vegetable.

"How was I to know? I never tried to cook any before," said Dick innocently. "There it goes again," and Dick gathered a spoon and saucer and began dishing out more rice. "I supposed the stuff was like potatoes or any other decent vegetable, you put on as much as you wanted. The next time I cook rice, I'll put sideboards on the pan," complained Dick when he had eased the pressure on the bubbling mass.

"Blamed if he ain't cooked half the rice we've got," announced Tom after investigating the receptacle for rice. "Dick, you will have to be invested with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Boss Cooks."

"I'd better be invested with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Boss Fools, I guess. I ought to have had more sense. Mamma has cooked it lots of times, but I never paid any attention to how she did it," said Dick in disgust.

"Well, Dick, it's done now and can't be helped. As a penalty you can eat the balance cold," remarked Tom.

"All right. I'll eat it as a punishment for my foolishness."

"It won't be much of a punishment, either, I'm thinking," observed Thad.

"Well, let's eat dinner and give Dick a rest. He won't do it again," said Frank.

"He won't do it more than once more, anyhow; there isn't rice enough left," said Tom, with a grin.

“What was the catch? I was too busy to look,” inquired Dick while they were eating.

“Fifteen rats, two mink, and two coons,” replied Tom.

“That means another big skinning bee,” said Dick.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

For several days the boys attended strictly to business. They ran their traps regularly, fishing and hunting just enough to supply their wants; for they could use but a limited amount, and they were not the boys to wantonly kill for the mere sake of killing when they knew they could neither eat nor sell it in their present location.

One afternoon while all were busily engaged in skinning and stretching their furs, they were startled by a hail from the north bank, opposite the Greased Lightning.

Looking up, the boys beheld a youth apparently about their own age, standing on the bank with a gun over his shoulder. Excepting the man whose dog Tom had shot at, the young hunter was the first human being, or track of a human being, that the boys had seen since leaving the Mountain Belle.

"Hello, yourself. Where you going?" Thad called out.

"Nowhere in particular. Just out huntin' a little. Where you fellers goin'?" was the reply in a good-natured voice.

"Oh, we are just taking a trip down the river, hunting and trapping. We got a steamboat to tow us up here; we live way down the river," was the information Thad imparted.

After passing a few further remarks with the youth, Tom said in a low tone:

"Maybe we had better ask him over. He may give us some pointers on the country around here. He doesn't look like a dumbhead."

"Yes, let's do so. He looks like a decent sort of a fellow," said Frank.

Then Thad called out: "Want to come across and look us over?"

"I don't mind, only it's too cold to wade," their visitor replied with a short laugh.

Tom jumped into a skiff and in a few minutes brought the young fellow over. He was a tall, freckled-faced boy with a pair of bright, inquisitive gray eyes that seemed to take in everything. Faded, blue denim overalls adorned with numerous patches and tucked in cow-hide boots encased his long legs, and a rusty-looking, old black coat did duty as a hunting coat. This outfit was topped by a black slouch hat that had evidently seen several years, if not centuries, of wear. A shot pouch was belted around

his waist and over his shoulder was slung the regulation half pound powder flask in use where the muzzle-loader held sway.

While our young hunters were not over eager to make the acquaintance of strangers, every one of them mentally decided, from his frank, open countenance, that the youth was honest and trustworthy. It doesn't take boys long to get acquainted, and our young friends quickly found out that the youth's name was George Brown, and that he lived on a farm about a mile and a half northwest of them. In return, the boys gave their own names and addresses, and everybody felt at ease.

The first thing, as a matter of course, the stranger's gun had to be examined and commented upon.

"Got a muzzle-loader, I see," remarked Thad, reaching for the weapon.

"Yep. And she's a good one. The best gun in seven states to shoot," replied the boy in a tone of pride, as he surrendered the gun for inspection.

Although it showed the signs of years of wear and poor care, when new it had evidently been a pretty high grade muzzle-loader. It had what we boys used to call "sunk tubes" (how we used to long for a double-barrel with "sunk tubes"!) and the locks worked smoothly with an oily click. When Thad glanced at the rib he saw the familiar legend: "London Fine Twist" engraved thereon.

“What kind o’ guns you fellers got?” inquired the blue denim youth, after his weapon had gone the rounds and been properly inspected.

“We have four shotguns and two rifles, all breech-loaders,” replied Thad.

“Is that so? Got them new-fangled kind o’ guns, eh? I’d like to see ’em. I never saw but one or two, but I’ve always heard they wasn’t much ’count; just made for them fancy dude hunters from the city, to cut a splurge with. Guess they never kill nothin’ with ’em; leastwise I never heard o’ any of ’em killin’ anything. They was one of ’em stayed to our house nearly a week last fall. Gosh, but he had a gay outfit; silver-mounted breech-loader an’ everything to match. He had most a trunk full o’ huntin’ clothes; coats an’ hats an’ caps an’ boots an’ shirts an’ the Lord knows what all. An’ he had a nail-kag full o’ cartridges, all loaded. But shucks, he couldn’t hit nothin’. Why I’ve seen him shoot at a robin settin’ on a fence post not more’n six rod away, an’ never touch it; an’ a gun that won’t kill six rod ain’t much good. He didn’t kill but one duck while he was there, an’ I guess that was crippled when he found it, ’cause it was poor as a snake. Ducks was thick, too, but he didn’t seem to know how to crawl up to ’em. Mebbe he was ’fraid o’ dirtyin’ his nice huntin’ clothes. I had to work so I couldn’t go with him, but one day it was

rainin' an' I took my old gun an' went up to a lake above the house a ways. They was a big flock feedin' in there close to shore. I crawled up an' waited till they swum together an' then give 'em one barrel settin' an' the other when they jumped, an' I got seven. Gosh, you ought to seen that feller's eyes open when I brought 'em in. He bought every one of 'em an' took 'em home with him. I s'pose he told everybody he killed 'em. I tell you it'll be a long while 'fore they beat these old guns shootin'," and young Brown fondled his muzzle-loader affectionately.

"I'll show you one of our guns," said Thad, arising when he saw that young Brown had ended his recital.

He returned in a moment with Frank's double-barrel. "There is a breech-loader that will shoot," he remarked quietly.

"Gosh, she's a beauty all right," said the young man admiringly.

"It shoots just as good as it looks," observed Frank, who had been watching their guest with considerable curiosity.

"How many shot will it put in a foot ring, eight rod?" asked the young farmer, after he had looked the gun over.

"I don't know; but it will put more in than yours will, I think," said Frank.

"I'd bet you a dollar if I had it with me, that it won't," replied Brown confidently.

"Betting won't decide it. Let's shoot at a thirty inch circle, forty yards; that's about eight rods," said Thad.

"All right. I'll shoot against any of your guns," said Brown with an air of great confidence.

Thad cut a thirty inch circle out of wrapping paper and pinned it up against two trees that grew close together. Then he stepped off forty good paces, and, coming back, remarked:

"What sized shot are you loaded with?"

"Number 4."

"Got any other sizes?"

"Yes; I've got some 2's."

Thad smiled. "Worse yet. Haven't you any 6's?"

"No. I never had any luck with fine shot; they just tickle. Big shot is what hurts."

Thad said with an amused smile: "I'll take you out hunting some day and show you how hard they tickle. But now we want the same sized load of the same sized shot. Have you a wormer?"

"Yes."

"Then draw your shot, and we will take the shot out of two of our number 6 shells and put them in your gun."

"All right. I'll plaster the mark all over with fine shot," said the youth with the muzzle-loader.

When all was ready, Thad said: "Now, Mr. Brown, see what your gun will do."

Brown stepped to the mark and raising his gun, took deliberate aim and fired. On walking forward, the target was found to be moderately sprinkled, although rather uneven. A careful count showed seventy-five pellets in the paper.

"I call that pretty good. Now let's see how much your new style guns beats it," said Brown triumphantly.

Tom tacked another target exactly the same size of the first.

Thad inserted a shell in the gun and handed it to Frank. "Here, Frank, this is your gun; you want to see that it has a fair show."

Frank shook his head. "No, you shoot it, Thad. I never was worth a cent on stationary targets with a shotgun. You will be surer to do it justice than I."

Brown grinned good-naturedly. "I guess you fellers is a little afraid your gun won't show up like you thought it would."

Without replying, Thad stepped to the score, threw the gun on the target, and pulled the trigger.

At the report everybody ran up to see the result of the shot. Thad had centered it fairly, and the paper resembled the top of a big pepper-box. The boys glanced at the target and then at young Brown. It was amusing to watch the expression on his face. His jaw dropped with utter astonishment and wonder as he gazed

speechless at the great number of evenly distributed pellets—an even two hundred!

“Well, I’ll be gosh blamed if that don’t beat anything I ever saw in the shootin’ line. I didn’t suppose a gun was ever made that could shoot that way. I’ll knock under; my old fusee is a back number compared to that gun. You boys might have had everything I got. Much obliged for lettin’ me off so easy.”

Our friends had rather expected the young farmer to take his defeat more to heart. In fact they half expected to be accused of cheating in some way, but his honest, good-natured admission completely disarmed their fears, and it would have been ill grace for them to have boasted had they been so disposed, which they were not.

In reply to Thad’s query if he wished to try again, their visitor shook his head. “No use, boys. You’ve got the best gun.”

“If you are satisfied, come in the cabin and we’ll show you the rest of our outfit,” said Thad.

Then everybody adjourned to the Greased Lightning where the boys exhibited all of their guns and other paraphernalia, and Thad explained why the modern choke bore breech-loader was superior to the old style cylinder bore muzzle-loader.

In turn their visitor told them of the lay of the land roundabout, and where the lakes and

ponds were. The boys learned that the forest ended about a mile above, and two miles to the west of them. North and west of that the land was cultivated.

"Are there any deer around here?" inquired Tom.

"Yes, a good many, but they're awful shy."

"We wouldn't know a deer track from a post-hole, and I doubt if we would know a deer unless it was labeled," remarked Dick.

"I'll bet you I would," returned Tom confidently.

"You probably wouldn't hurt it much if you did," said Dick dryly.

"Well, it's five o'clock, and I must go home and do the blamed chores; I wish they was in Joppa," said young Brown, arising.

Tom set him across the little river and he departed with an invitation to come again.

"I rather like that fellow," remarked Tom, as he climbed on board again.

"So do I," replied Thad. "He is evidently pretty green, and what he doesn't know about guns and shooting would make a big book, but I think he is honest and straight as a yardstick."

A few days after the visit from the young farmer, so ludicrous an adventure befell Tom that the boys laughed about it for a week.

There was nothing Tom delighted so much in as to take the big repeater and wander

stealthily about through the forest looking for some kind of big game. He had practiced on targets and mud turtles until he really had become quite expert in shooting and manipulating the powerful weapon. After hitting a mud turtle at two hundred yards he would remark: "The first deer, bear, or panther I run across will get it in the neck just like that."

On the day in question, Tom shouldered the 45-70 and started off for a short ramble through the woods. In about two hours he returned. When he came in the other boys saw at once by the expression on his face that something had occurred to ruffle his temper.

"Well, Tom, did you bag a Bengal tiger, or a grizzly bear, this time?" inquired Frank, looking up from a book he was reading.

"You look as though you had shot at a deer standing at twenty yards and hit a tree forty feet to one side," remarked Dick when he had caught the expression on Tom's features.

"Oh, shut up, or I'll shoot a hole through the side of the boat," replied Tom with a look of disgust that was comical to see.

"Out with it, Tom; confession is good for the soul. We'll try and not laugh at you," said Thad, trying to look solemn.

"That's where the trouble is. You confounded dolts don't know when to let up nagging a fellow," said Tom, glaring around at his mates. Then gradually a broad smile over-

spread his features; he slapped his leg and broke into a laugh, as he added: "But, by George, it's too good to keep."

"Fire away, and we'll sympathize with you," added Dick, tipping back in his chair.

"Might as well tell it, I suppose," said Tom resignedly.

"You see," he continued, "I sneaked around through the woods for about an hour looking for something to shoot at bigger than a squirrel. I could have shot a car-load of those little monkeys, but that isn't any fun, besides, after one of these bullets hits a squirrel there isn't anything left of him but the tail and legs. After I'd walked a mile or two, I sat down on a big log to rest. I sat there maybe half an hour, watching the squirrels barking and scolding and chasing each other up and down the trees like a lot of cats. After a while I thought I'd move on a little further, so I got up on the log and walked along to about the middle of it and then stopped and gawked around a minute.

"Just then I heard a crashing and tearing through the trees and brush, and I thought sure an elephant or a lion was coming, so I got the old gun ready and waited. Pretty quick something came cantering past so close I could have reached it with a fish-pole. At first I thought the blamed thing was a calf, but after I had stared at it with my mouth open until it was almost by me, I got a great big hunch that it

was a fawn. Then you bet the old gun came up quicker than a flash, and just then the confounded fawn stopped and looked at me. I tried to get aim on it but the gun wobbled around so I couldn't. Finally I got desperate and pulled the trigger anyhow; near as I can figure, I knocked the top off of an old sycamore about fifty feet above me." Here Tom stopped and laughed immoderately. "Then the fawn started on again, and when I tried to work the lever to throw in another shell, I fell off the log." Tom stopped again and went off into another paroxysm of laughter.

"Well, go on with your deer killing; what did you do then?" said Dick.

"I didn't do anything for a minute, I was so mad I could have made a meal off of a stove poker. After the fawn was a couple of miles away, I got the lever to working and fired two or three shots into the woods just for meanness. Oh, but it was aggravating! I just sat down on the log and tried to think up some new cuss words bad enough for the occasion, but I couldn't, so I gave it up and came back to camp. Say, I'll give you fellows nine dollars apiece to kick me through the window."

Thad, Frank, and Dick sprang simultaneously to the middle of the room, but Tom, seeing their willingness, backed into a corner and cried out: "Hold on. Come to think, I haven't that much money with me, and I don't want you to work for nothing."

"I suppose that was what they call 'buck ague,' " said Frank, seating himself again.

"Of course it was," said Dick in great disgust. "Here we send out a man who claims he is a regular old hunter, after venison, and he pans out a tenderfoot, and falls off a log big as a billiard table when he tries to load his gun. Tommy, I'm disapp'inted in you."

"I am disappointed in myself. But honest, boys, I believe if I could have worked the lever quick enough I would have killed it the second shot," replied Tom with some of his old-time confidence.

"Hear! Hear!" shouted Dick. "He misses a deer twenty feet away standing still, and then claims he could have killed it running the next shot if he hadn't fallen off the log. That is the last straw, Thomas. Out of the window you go," and Dick seized Tom's big bulk and made a vain attempt at carrying him to the window, amid shouts of laughter.

Dick might have succeeded in getting Tom to the window in the course of a couple of hours' hard work, but just then there came a hail from the north bank and he ceased operations as Frank went to the door. Their recent acquaintance, George Brown, was standing on the bank with his fowling-piece over his shoulder and Thad, jumping into a skiff, quickly ferried him over.

"I got a half day off and come down to see

if you boys were out of meat. Thought if you was, some of you might want to take a little duck hunt with me," he announced after the greetings were over.

"How is the larder, cook?" inquired Thad, turning to Tom.

"It is getting pretty low; only two teal in the ice-box," replied Tom.

"Is that possible? Here we are right on the verge of starvation and didn't know it," said Thad in mock surprise.

"You go with Brown, Thad, and the rest of us will stay and finish our work. Maybe Dick and I will catch a mess of fish while you are gone," Frank remarked.

"How does that programme strike the rest of you?" inquired Thad.

"All right; go ahead," from Tom and Dick.

"There's a couple o' lakes west o' here about a mile, where the woods open up a little, that's always full o' ducks," remarked Brown while Thad was getting ready.

"How near can we row to them?" asked Thad.

"Within eighty rod."

"That's good enough. We'll take the skiff," said Thad, slipping on his rubber boots.

Then he looked young Brown over doubtfully a moment and remarked: "Say, what makes you wear a black hat and a black coat?"

The object of his remarks looked up in surprise. "Why?"

"Because the color is so conspicuous. You might as well carry a United States flag hoisted on your shoulder to show the ducks where you are."

"I never thought anything about that part of it. I always wear what I happen to have on," young Brown replied simply.

"Let him wear one of mine to-day," said Frank generously.

When Brown was decked out in a dead-grass colored coat and hat, he made quite a respectable-looking duck hunter.

"That's better," said Thad, surveying his new partner. "A duck would see that black hat of yours four miles, especially when you stand in the brown rushes."

The two boys and Bruno were soon in the skiff and on their way up the little river.

"I'll bet Thad will open Brown's eyes a little on shooting ducks," said Tom with a chuckle, "for I will say that Thad is one of the best shots I ever saw, barring his old dad."

"His old dad can't beat him very much, any more," said Dick in a tone of brotherly pride.

"He is the best I ever saw," said Frank, as they returned to their work.

The sun had set, and over the west a gold and crimson halo suffused the sky with a softened radiance like a picture of the Madonna. The cool, restful twilight was stealing over the forest and wrapping the wide, silent Mississippi

in the sombre garb of night. Looking up the little river, arched with great trees, was like looking into the mouth of a huge tunnel. The owls, now fully awake, were hooting and calling to each other, evidently discussing some question of importance in owl politics.

Supper was ready and Thad had not returned.

"I wish he would show up," said Dick uneasily, as he peered wistfully out of the window into the gathering gloom.

"He will be here in a minute and hungry as a bear, too, I'll wager. It always makes a fellow hungry to tramp around and shoot," replied Tom cheerfully.

Hardly had he spoken when the dip of oars came through the stillness, and a skiff appeared in the mouth of the tunnel.

"Here he is," cried Dick joyfully, and they all crowded out to welcome their comrade.

"Duck hunter, ahoy!" and Tom caught the prow of the skiff.

"Supper, ahoy!" cried Thad, unshipping the oars and straightening up.

"Supper is all ready and waiting to be 'ahoyed,'" replied Dick.

"What did you get?" asked Frank.

"Here is a gallon jug I got at one shot," and Thad handed up a big brown jug to his wondering mates.

"Land o' Goshen! Where did you get that?"

You and Brown must have been out to some distillery all the afternoon. What is it, whiskey?" and Tom took the jug with a sniff.

"I see a few ducks, anyhow," remarked Dick, peering into the skiff.

"There should be twelve. Yes, here they are, just an even dozen," and Thad threw the birds on deck and stepped out of the skiff.

"But what is in this jug? I am consumed with curiosity," said Tom, eyeing the article doubtfully.

"Ah, I *sabe* now. Give it to me," and Tom me and I'll give you an imitation of a fellow taking a drink. Here's to you, lads," and Thad pulled the cork and, glug-glug, the contents went down his throat as if he had been an old toper.

"Ah, I *sabe* now. Give it to me," and Tom gave a pretty fair imitation of a summer brook flowing over the pebbles.

"Here, young fellow, let up and give Frank and me a show," said Dick, getting hold of the jug while Tom rubbed his stomach gratefully.

"Here, Frank."

"Age before beauty, always," replied Frank gracefully.

"Your show is pretty slim on either, so I'll hit it." And Dick proceeded to do so, hard and proper.

"Gee, but that's bully good, rich, sweet milk," said Dick, drawing a long breath as he handed the jug to Frank.

“There, there, Frank. Let up, and leave some of the milk to get sour, and I’ll make you some of the nicest pancakes you ever tasted for breakfast,” Tom remarked.

“I’m afraid there won’t much of that milk get sour,” said Frank as he eased down the jug.

“Come on, boys, I’m hungry,” and Thad was actually seated at the table before Dick.

“Did you teach Brown anything about the noble art of shooting ducks?” Tom asked as he was pouring the coffee.

An amused smile spread over Thad’s face as he replied: “I don’t know; I guess so. I had a circus, anyhow.”

“How many did you kill?” Frank inquired.

“We stopped shooting when we had thirty; we took eighteen of them to Brown’s house. That’s where I got this milk.”

“So you’ve been visiting, eh?” said Dick.

“Yes, a little. It was only half a mile to Brown’s home from where we were shooting; and after we had ducks enough he insisted I walk over there and get a drink of milk. So I went over with him and got acquainted with the family. Besides George, there is an older brother—a man grown, father, mother, and two sisters. They are nice people, too, but they are working themselves to death trying to make money. They insisted on my taking the jug of milk, and George helped me carry it and the ducks to the boat.”

“That’s the kind of neighbors to have; and the next deer Tom kills, we will send them a quarter,” said Dick with a wink.

“You keep your face full of potato and shut up,” retorted the long-suffering Tom.

“The lakes where we were shooting,” continued Thad, “are only a short distance west of the one where our traps are set; and it is one of the finest places to shoot ducks you ever saw. The timber there begins to open out into a flat bottom, dotted with rice lakes. One lake lies in the woods, and a quarter of a mile west of it, with scattered trees between, and connected by a narrow run, is another.

“The lake in the woods was full of ducks when we got there, and the first thing Brown wanted to do, was to crawl up to a big flock feeding along shore; but I held him back until I had looked the ground over and saw where to go. Ducks were flying backward and forward between these two lakes continually, and I saw in a mighty short time that we wanted to get on this flyway. So I said to Brown: ‘You let me engineer this thing and we will get all the ducks we want without crawling on our stomachs like a couple of snakes.’

“He looked at me in a funny way, and said: ‘I don’t know much about shootin’ ducks, but I don’t see how you are goin’ to get settin’ shots if you don’t crawl; ducks ain’t tame enough to let you walk up to ’em, not by a jugful.’

"I said: 'Never mind how we do it. You come with me and keep still and I'll show you.' With that I threw the gun over my shoulder and started along the shore as though I didn't care whether we got any ducks or not.

"Of course they began to get up ahead of us in bunches and singles, and fly out over the pass to the next lake, just as I knew they would. I took a sly peep at Brown, and the expression on his face would have made a wooden Indian laugh. He was evidently so disgusted and mad to think that he had been fool enough to go hunting with such a blockheaded simpleton, that he could hardly hold himself." Here Thad broke off into a hearty laugh, in which the other boys joined. "I didn't say anything, but hurried along to the run, and when I came to a bunch of rushes that suited me, I stopped and said: 'Let's get in here.'

"I tramped down enough rushes in the middle so Brown and I would have elbow room, and Bruno could lie behind us, and then got ready for business. The run was sprinkled with rushes and open water and very shallow. While we were waiting for a flock, Brown looked around disdainfully and finally said with a sniff: 'You may be on to your business, but seems to me you've got queer ideas about shootin' ducks. You don't expect ducks to 'light here, do you?'

"I said: 'Of course not; we don't want them to 'light; shoot them when they go by.' Then he looked more disgusted than ever.

“ ‘If you can’t shoot any better than I can a-flyin’, we’ll get mighty few ducks. I can’t hit ‘em flyin’, they go too all-fired fast.’

“Just then I saw a bunch coming and said: ‘Here comes a flock. See how many you can kill, and I won’t shoot.’

“Brown cocked his gun and began to wriggle about and get it up to his shoulder. Pretty quick a nice little bunch of about a dozen blue-wings came along just over the rushes and about twenty yards from us. Just as they were opposite us Brown poked his gun straight at them and pulled the trigger. I think the bunch must have been ten feet past the line of shot before the powder exploded. Of course he didn’t kill any. He went through about the same manoeuvre in shooting that you did, Dick, that time we were going to salt down the barrel of teal,” said Thad with a wink.

“Oh, there were others that day. Go on with your story,” replied Dick calmly.

“When I saw Brown shoot,” continued Thad, “I knew he didn’t know the A B C of wing shooting, so I said: ‘You stand still and give me sea-room and I’ll see what I can do with these gentlemen.’

“We didn’t have to wait more than a minute, for the ducks wanted to go back into the lake where we had routed them out, when a bunch came along. I never moved or batted an eye until they passed us. Brown looked astonished

and had just opened his mouth to say something when the ducks got where I wanted them, and I threw the gun onto them and smashed three. I never saw a fellow more tickled and excited than he was. 'You killed three. I'll git 'em,' he yelled, and then dropped his gun and started out of the blind. I caught him by the arm. 'Stand still. Bruno will get the ducks.' Then I re-loaded and sent Bruno after the birds. Before he got back, a pair of mallards came along and I killed both of them. Brown got excited again and wanted to go splashing out in the water after these two, but I told him the dog would get all the ducks we killed, and he cooled down a little and went to loading his gun. Then a single bluebill went zipping past, going as if Satan was after him. I knocked it down, and I thought Brown never *would* get his mouth shut again, from staring at me. I had to turn my head to laugh.

" 'Gosh,' he said. 'That beats anything I ever saw or heard of. How did you do it? You must be one of them experts I've read about.'

" 'I told him I was no expert, just a plain country duck hunter.'

" 'You must have aimed forty feet ahead of that duck, didn't you?'

" 'No,' I said, 'I didn't aim ahead of it at all; I aimed right at it.'

" 'Then he was more mystified than ever. I didn't have time to explain why I let them get

by so far before shooting, as the ducks kept coming so fast it took all my time to attend to them. In fact, it was about the prettiest shooting I ever had; ducks coming or going every two or three minutes. Sometimes I would have ten or a dozen down in the run at one time, before Bruno could retrieve them. Then Brown would get so excited he didn't know whether he was on his head or heels. He didn't try to shoot any more; just stood and watched me. Sometimes when I'd let down two or three at a shot, he would swing his hat and yell so you could hear him a mile: 'Sock it to 'em, Thad! knock the stuffin' out of 'em!'

"After we had nearly all the birds we wanted, I said: 'Here, Brown, you will never learn to shoot on the wing unless you try.'

"But he shook his head. 'No use to try. I couldn't do it in a hundred years. I don't see how you shoot so quick; you don't seem to take any aim at all.'

"After coaxing awhile and going through the motions of throwing the gun onto imaginary ducks, I persuaded him to try it once more. I got him primed up just as a little bunch came along, and, honest, I would have given a house and lot to have had you fellows where you could have watched him. He clutched his gun as though he expected it to get away from him, and when I said 'shoot,' he swung it out as if he was trying to hit somebody on the head with it.

Then he stopped it dead still, shut his eyes and banged away. Of course he didn't come within four rods of the ducks, and then I showed him that he must pull the trigger just before he stopped the gun. He tried and tried, and finally did scratch down one duck from the edge of a flock. Then he wouldn't shoot any more. Said he was going to quit while his credit was good.

"After we had the ducks tied up, and ready to leave, I took a piece of paper and pencil and showed him the difference between shooting out in front at a square right angle, and waiting until the birds got by and shooting at a sharp acute angle. He caught on to the idea all right and said he would keep on trying until he could hit them, but he works so hard, he doesn't have time to get out more than half a dozen times a year, he told me, so he will probably forget all about it. But we made old Bruno earn his supper, didn't we, Bruno?" added Thad, grinning over at his four-footed partner, lying in his accustomed place near the door. Bruno thumped the floor a couple of times, without lifting his nose from his paws, heaved a sigh, and said nothing.

CHAPTER V.

THE COUNTRY DANCE.

A couple of days after the duck hunt described in the previous chapter, the boys received another visit from their new friend George Brown, who, after passing a few remarks, threw the whole camp into a state of excitement by inviting them to attend a dance at his home the following evening.

“Us fellows go to a dance; the idea! This would be a nice outfit to attend dances, wouldn't it, boys?” cried Thad, looking around at his mates.

“I don't see anything the matter with this outfit. What's to hinder your going?” asked Brown soberly.

“Well, there are a number of weighty reasons why we couldn't enter society consistently. One reason is we haven't any clothes fit for the occasion. Another is—”

"Oh, shucks," young Brown broke in with an uproarious laugh. "I guess you fellers never went to any dances in this part o' the country, or you wouldn't talk that way. Of course I don't mean to say you don't have to wear *any* clothes, but you can wear any kind o' clothes you want to. Why, half the boys will wear old blue overalls tucked in their boots; cowhide boots covered with milk stains, at that. Mebbe a few will have on a boiled shirt, but they are an exception. I haven't anything better'n a pair o' jeans pants to wear; so clothes needn't bother you. You fellers can wear your hunting coats, if you want to. Some o' the boys take off their coats and dance in their shirt sleeves when they git warmed up. Mebbe two or three of 'em, that have girls they're sparkin' purty hard, and want to look extra nice, 'll wear paper collars, but that's about the extent o' the dressin' up. Clothes don't cut any figure here. One man's good's another, if he behaves himself. Now will you come?"

Thad looked around at the other boys doubtfully.

"I don't care. Just as the rest say."

"I'd just as soon go as not," said Tom.

"What do you say, Frank; want to go?" asked Thad.

"I don't care; I'll go where the gang goes."

"Dick?"

"I suppose so. We'll probably make jays of ourselves though."

"We're all jays, so that needn't worry you," remarked young Brown with a grin.

"What music do you have?" asked Frank.

"Two fiddles; first and second. The Haskel boys."

"Do you suppose we can find the way?" asked Tom.

"Yes, that's easy. Walk up the bank of the Mississippi a mile until you come to where a pile of wood's ranked up; then go west forty rods, and you come to the main road that goes right past our house. It's the first house, you can't miss it."

"All right. I guess we can find the way," said Tom, and young Brown took his departure.

The following evening after supper had been eaten and the dishes washed, the boys began to "dress" for the dance.

"The way Brown talked, we won't need to make a very elaborate toilet," Thad remarked.

"I don't know how the rest of you fellows are fixed, but I haven't even a white shirt with me," said Tom.

"Neither has Thad nor I. What do you want with a white shirt?" queried Dick.

"I don't want any. Only I thought if the rest of you wore white shirts and I didn't, folks would take me for the hired man."

"Because if you want one, you can wear my white nighty just as well as not," pursued Dick.

"No, thanks. I'll worry along with my old woolen shirt."

"I have a white shirt, but I don't propose to wear it if the rest of you haven't any. I don't want to be the only dude in the party. In fact, from what Brown said, it doesn't make much difference what we wear," said Frank, who was engaged in the delicate and laborious occupation of shaving, if scraping the light-colored down from his beardless face could be dignified by such a term.

"You might put on your good clothes and show these benighted people what a well-dressed person looks like," suggested Thad, winking at Tom and Dick.

"Excuse me. I don't think I will make a spectacle of myself for you fellows to laugh at. When I am among the Romans, I do as the Romans do."

"You are not doing as the Romans do now, I'll warrant," remarked Dick, eyeing Frank's tonsorial operations with considerable interest.

"What's that?" inquired Frank, untying a knot in his face and letting his distorted features settle back to their original shape.

"Shaving. The Romans around here probably don't shave once in six months."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I guessed at it. They probably shave and dig the real estate out of their ears twice a year. Thad's a Roman, too."

"Don't bother us about such trivial matters. I am too busy dressing for the ball," said Thad absently.

"I believe I'm upholstered good enough already; taking Brown at his word," said Dick.

"Say, hadn't we better start before dark, so we will be sure to find the way," said Tom.

"Yes, and we might take a lantern to help us back home in the dark; and say, boys, while I think of it, we must leave this locality soon, and drift on down the old 'Father of Waters,' or we'll get frozen up before we get back home, and that wouldn't be a bit funny," remarked Thad.

"That's right, boys. We ought to dig out of here right away. We can hunt, fish, and trap farther down the river when we are nearer home. I haven't any particular desire to get frozen in, 'way off up in this country, if we can help it. This craft isn't very swift, and we are likely to hit a sandbar every few miles and lose a week's time getting off," said Tom.

"That last remark is no fairy story, either," said Dick sagely.

So the boys decided then and there to take up their traps on the morrow and start down the river the day following.

After giving Bruno a friendly lecture on attending to business and watching the Greased Lightning, the boys crossed the little stream and started for the dance. They experienced no difficulty in finding the way, and arrived at the Brown homestead shortly after dark.

"We are a little early, but thought it best to start before dark," said Thad in apology for their appearance before the dance began.

"You did just right," said their friend George, who met them at the door. "Come in. Here, mother; you know Thad Kingston, the chap that showed me how to kill ducks; and this is his brother Dick, and this is Tom Evans, and this is Frank Howard, his friends that are taking the trip down the river with him."

Mrs. Brown, a short, heavy-set, motherly-looking woman, extended her hands cordially. "Glad to see all of you, boys. Come right in and have chairs. You won't find any style here; the young folks are just having a little gathering, and of course they have to dance. George, take the boys' hats. Pa and Samuel are out doing the chores—ah, here's pa now. Pa, you know Mr. Kingston, the young man that killed all those ducks for George; and this is his brother, and Mr. Evans, and Mr. Howard."

Mr. Brown, a tall, powerfully-built man of forty-five or thereabouts, a very reticent-appearing giant, quietly acknowledged the introduction, and then proceeded to fill a short clay pipe with "Tom and Jerry" and seat himself in an old-fashioned rocking-chair by the window where he smoked in silence.

In a short time the young folks began to gather in by twos and threes, laughing and joking. They were conducted into the "front

room," that had been cleared of furniture and carpets to admit of dancing, and from thence the girls were whisked away to a convenient bedroom, to "take off their things," as they express it in the country, while the boys seated themselves in the chairs that circled the vacant room, and fell to discussing the crops, stock, fall plowing, and other current farm topics. Their conversation was punctured with frequent flashes of wit, some of it bright and keen as a rapier's thrust. For be it known, the rural districts of these broad United States hold many a youth who so far from having "The emptiness of ages in his face," has a well-developed, intelligent mind, and a wit as keen and pungent as ever sparkled in the halls of wealth and culture. He may live and die unknown to the world, as "Many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its fragrance on the desert air," but every generation witnesses an increase in the number, and an uplifting of the masses. Education and liberty are the keys that are unlocking the dungeons of the mind and letting in the blessed sunlight of knowledge to the intellect of the toilers, who have been the sport and playthings of kings and emperors these many weary ages.

The dull, stupid, cringing, servile peasantry, depicted in literature as the people of the Old World, has few counterparts in the rural districts of Uncle Sam's domains. Imagine some

noble lord driving along the highway of our great middle West, and accosting a farmer with a demand to do some menial service for his lordship at once. I fancy the august personage would promptly hear some remarks couched in vigorous English that would furnish food for reflection the balance of the day, and perhaps coupled with a request to betake himself to that storied region where "Manitoba Waves" are unknown and the iceman ventureth not. Not that these people are surly and ill-mannered, but it is the tone of command they object to. Millions for kindness and courtesy, but not one cent for arrogance and command.

Now, boy readers, if you will kindly overlook this little digression, we will proceed to carve the mutton some more.

Our four friends remained in the room they had first entered, that served as sitting-room, dining-room, and kitchen, chatting with the old folks, until the shrill, keen notes of a violin called their attention.

The musicians were tuning their instruments. Then came the stentorian voice of the floor manager:

"Form on for a quadrille!"

At this juncture, George Brown came into the room and said:

"Come on, boys. Do you want to dance the first set?"

"I guess not. We will go in and see how

you do it, first," replied Thad, speaking for the four, as they arose and passed into the "ball-room."

A score and a half of young people were gathered in the room, where there was scant space to form two sets between the rows of chairs. The musicians were seated on chairs that had been placed on a low table, to enable them to get a better view of the dancers; the second violin acting as prompter, or "caller," as he was termed. Soon after the boys entered the room, the two sets were formed; the first violin twanged the strings of his instrument two or three times to get his bearings, reached into his hip pocket for a slab of plug tobacco, detached a generous section with his eye teeth and handed the remains to his partner, who cut another crescent out of it. The head musician then slid the chin rest of his violin well up under the right side of his vest; deposited a couple of ounces of liquid tobacco in a cuspidore on the floor by the table, and started in on an old, familiar quadrille, his heavy, cowhide boots beating time with energy.

The dancers' toes were impatiently tapping the floor, keeping time to the music, when the prompter yelled:

"All join hands and circle to the left," and the dance was on.

Thad, Tom, and Dick, living in a country town, had attended many dances of a similar

character, but to Frank Howard, born and raised in a large city, a country dance was a new experience. Of course he had danced many times, but in a more conventional way. Here, the utter absence of conventionality; the heartfelt, absorbing interest the dancers took in the performance; the odd expressions used by the prompter in calling some of the changes of the cotillion, were both amusing and instructive to him.

However, all of the boys were treated so cordially, and made to feel so completely at home, that before they had been there half an hour, they entered into the spirit of the fun, and were laughing, joking, dancing, and perspiring with the rest.

After a while Frank slipped out into the sitting-room, in the wake of George Brown, and tapped him on the shoulder.

“What is the expense attached to this?”

Brown looked at him doubtfully. “Why, the boys’ll only give fifty cents apiece to-night ‘cause we don’t have supper; but I thought I wouldn’t charge you boys anything seein’ as you’re strangers here.”

Frank slipped a five dollar bill into his hand. “That is to pay for all four of us. Keep the change for yourself to buy ammunition or anything you want. Mum now, to everybody. If Thad, Tom, or Dick want to pay, tell them it is all settled for,” and Frank disappeared in the

crowd and went to dancing, leaving young Brown in a state of complete bewilderment. The idea of any one deliberately giving money away, was a problem too deep for him to solve.

However, Frank was not bothering his head over it. He was having a good time, and money was small matter to him.

Along toward midnight, when everybody was jolly and serene and the dancing at its height, Thad and George Brown were standing apart in one corner of the room watching the dancers, and conversing in low tones. While they were talking, two new arrivals came in.

Young Brown saw them, and his brow clouded. "There's Jim Grover and his brother Pete, and they've been drinking. I hoped they wouldn't come. Jim's so touchy and quarrelsome when he gets a little liquor in him, and he generally does, and Pete always backs him up in everything he does. That's his girl Frank is dancing with, and Jim don't allow anybody to hardly look at her, although he don't ever take her around any. She came here to-night with her brother. Just like Jim now to pick a fuss with Frank, he being a stranger. How is Howard; can he take care of himself?"

Thad looked troubled. "I don't know, I am sure. I never saw him in a fuss, but I'm afraid not. He has always lived in the city and I don't suppose ever was in a fight in his life."

"Mebbe Jim'll let him alone, but I'm afraid

not. We won't see Frank abused, anyhow. If it comes to the worst, I'll call up the old man. He can lick a ten-acre lot full of Jim Grovers, and Jim knows it."

Meanwhile, Frank Howard, totally unconscious of any impending trouble, was thoroughly enjoying himself. His slim, supple form was everywhere. Down the center; balancing, *chasséing*, whirling his partner; laughing and joking with the gayest, his handsome face was the picture of youthful enjoyment. The third change had ended and Frank was just leading his partner to a seat, when he felt her suddenly jerked from his arm, and found himself confronted by a fierce-looking, heavy-set young fellow, who growled out in no gentle tone:

"Say, stranger, that's my gal and I want you to let her alone and mind your own business, or I'll cuff your ears."

The hot blood mounted to Frank Howard's face at the insult, but he controlled himself and said calmly:

"I did not know that she belonged to any one. I was introduced to her and danced with her as I would with any lady. If I have injured you or the lady in any way, or transgressed any of the rules of your society here, I beg your pardon; but, although I am a stranger here and you are among your own crowd, I tell you to your teeth that it will take a better man than you to cuff my ears."

Frank's eyes blazed as he uttered these bold, defiant words to the burly youth confronting him, while everybody held his breath in amazement at the audacity of the white-faced, delicate-looking stranger in calling down the bully of the community. Thad was thunderstruck at this display of spirit. He and George Brown stood motionless, uncertain whether to step forward and interfere, or let matters take their course. Thad shrank from the thought of having his friend pounded by the bully's fists, but something held him where he stood.

A look of contempt came into Grover's face at Frank's words, and he said with a brutal oath:

"You white-faced puppy, you talk big. If you was half a man, I'd mash your jaw. As it is, I'll just cuff your ears and teach you who you're talkin' to." And with that, he aimed a sweeping blow at the side of Frank's head with his open palm.

If the blow had struck where it was intended, Frank would probably have seen a first-class assortment of stars; but it didn't. He ducked like a flash, and as Grover's hand swept over his head, and he was turned half around from the force of the blow, Howard dealt him a blow in the ear that sent his burly form sprawling on the floor at the feet of his audience. Frank's coat and vest came off with a jerk, went flying through the air into Thad's arms, and he stood defiantly awaiting the onset of his foe.

Grover sprang to his feet with a growl of rage and came at his despised antagonist, but his awkward, ungainly strength availed him little. A bull might as well have tried to fight a shadow. Frank danced about him like a rubber ball, smashing him in the mouth, nose, and jaw, with one or both hands, until the blood streamed from the bully's face. Then when Grover reached to grasp his antagonist in a bear-like hug, Frank ducked under his arm, and coming up behind, dealt him a blow behind the ear that sent him to the floor again. Once more the bully sprang to his feet, half dazed, and wild with rage, only to meet with a dose of the same medicine, until Frank caught him with a sidewinder on the jaw that sent him crashing to the floor again.

At this juncture, Pete Grover, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, seeing that his brother was getting much the worst of the battle, started across the room for Frank with blood in his eye.

Love of fair play, however, is inherent in every human breast, high or low, rich or poor, and half a dozen voices shouted:

“Hands off, Pete Grover. Two on one don't go.”

Pete, however, paid no attention to the warning, and two or three of the boldest of the shouters started to seize him, but their assistance was not needed. Frank heard the shout and faced

his new antagonist. Quick as a cat he turned a handspring, and his feet striking Grover in the "solar plexus," hurled him backward on the floor as though shot from a catapult.

Thad had watched the battle as one in a trance. Was it possible that this cool, nervy, lightning-like disciple of the prize ring could be his quiet, gentle friend, whom he would have sworn could not whip a ten-year-old boy, and whom he should have expected to faint at the sight of blood? He half believed he was dreaming and would awake presently in the cabin of the Greased Lightning. When Pete Grover went down before Frank's curious onslaught, Thad's wonder was intensified.

Tom and Dick, standing in another part of the room, were as much mystified over their friend's actions as Thad; and Dick actually pinched himself to see if he were awake.

Frank was on his feet in an instant, awaiting the attack of his foes, instead of belittling himself by pounding a fallen antagonist, as doubtless either of his foes would have done had he been down. Everybody's sympathy was plainly with Frank, and now that he had two foes to confront, it looked as though a free fight were imminent. The girls had long since fled the scene, leaving only an excited crowd of young fellows, the major part of whom evidently stood in awe of the Grover boys, but were now in no mood to see an injustice done Frank after his plucky fight.

How it would have ended it is impossible to say, but at that instant some one noticed the gigantic form of their host standing in the doorway. How long he had stood there watching the fight, no one knew, but he was evidently a man of prompt action when once his mind was made up to do a thing. Ere another blow could be struck, he cried out in a commanding voice: "Jim and Pete Grover, take your hats and get out of my house before I wring your necks. I won't have my guests insulted by such truck as you. Git!"

Without a word the two Grover boys picked up their hats and sneaked out of the house in a sullen, shamefaced manner, and everybody felt relieved. Then the country boys began to crowd around Frank in a wondering, worshipful way, but he put on his coat and vest and walked straight up to his host.

"Mr. Brown, I am heartily ashamed of myself for fighting in your house and before ladies, too. I am very sorry I was so hot blooded. I will take my hat and go also."

But his host extended a hand the size of a ham, and gripped his own. "You'll do nothing of the kind, for I don't believe you are to blame. I know the Grover boys clear through. You have done this community a great service by thrashing the worst bully in the neighborhood. Isn't that right, boys? Didn't Jim Grover start the fuss?" he asked, turning to the crowd.

“Yes,” shouted a dozen voices. “Jim insulted him and tried to slap his face.”

“Good. Just as I thought. We’ll just celebrate this event by getting up a supper in his honor. Go back to dancing, all of you, until it’s ready.”

A cheer went up; the girls filed back into the room, and the dancing was resumed.

Needless to say, Frank Howard was the “belle of the ball” for the remainder of the night. Wherever he went, he was the center of an adoring group of country youths.

Thus does muscle command respect.

It was after three o’clock in the morning before the festivities were over and our friends had departed for camp, after many a handshake and expression of good will from these honest, kind-hearted people. The boys lost no time in getting to bed on their arrival at camp, and were soon sleeping the sleep of youth and robust health.

CHAPTER VI.

DOWN THE RIVER.

It was after nine o'clock before there was a stir in the Greased Lightning. Then Tom rolled over and gaped. The unusual flood of light from the late sun fully awakened him and he called out: "Say, boys, it must be afternoon. Wake up; this is the day we take up the traps and get ready to migrate."

"Gracious Peter, that's so! I wonder what time it is anyhow," said Thad, who awakened by Tom's racket was feeling for his watch. "A quarter after nine and no breakfast started. This comes from dissipating too much."

"I say, Dick, put a clothes-pin on your nose or you will never make the top of the hill; you're losing too much steam," called Tom, heaving a pillow over into the other bunk.

The well-aimed missile landed on Dick's safety-valve, causing him to shut off the machinery and awake with a snort.

"You must have been taking a run for the hill," said Tom, as Dick sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"No, I wasn't. I was licking the stuffing out of Frank. If you'd just let me alone a minute longer he would have been done up proper; now I may never get another such chance," replied Dick regretfully.

"Oh, we'll fix that all right. I'll wake him and you can finish polishing him right now."

"No, thank you. I don't care for any of the pie when he is awake. Let him sleep and we'll go out and help Thad get breakfast."

"I admire your judgment on that score. I would rather be asleep, myself, if I were going to fight him," observed Tom.

"That's right, lads; get your hands in again on cooking. I must resign to-morrow," said Thad, as Tom and Dick came out and began to assist in preparing breakfast.

"How is that?" inquired Tom.

"The ship sails to-morrow, doesn't it? Did you ever hear of the Commodore cooking for the roustabouts?"

"I don't know that I ever did, but if you wish we will establish a precedent in this case," replied Tom.

"No, never mind; I think precedents are bad things."

"I suppose I'll have to try it next. I'll fix up some dishes that will make your hair curl," observed Dick.

"I don't doubt that a bit," said Tom with a laugh. "You will probably give us all a dose of dyspepsia."

"If I don't, it won't be my fault. I'll teach you fellows to take a duck-legged orphan 'way off up the river and make him cook for a lot of greasy roustabouts."

When breakfast was ready the boys concluded to eat and let Frank sleep awhile longer, but they had just begun the meal when that individual came out of the bedroom half dressed, yawning and stretching.

"Hello, here comes the pugilist. Somebody get a stuffed club, so if he breaks loose we can defend ourselves," said Dick, facetiously.

"My shotgun is handy, and Bruno will help, too," remarked Tom.

"Oh, come now, boys, let up, please do. You boys would have done the same thing under the circumstances," said Frank, looking very much disturbed.

"Not by a blamed sight, for the simple reason that we couldn't," said Dick with a grin.

"All right, Frank, we won't bother you about it on one condition: that you sit down here and tell us how you came to be such a shoulder hitter and athlete, and not say anything about it," said Tom.

"There isn't much to tell," said Frank after he had brightened himself up with a dash of cold water and was seated at the table. "I have

belonged to a gymnasium since I first started to school. I was not a very robust chap in my youth and my folks thought gymnastic work was a good thing, so I kept at it pretty steadily. Of course, practice makes perfect, and the last couple of years I was called the best all-round athlete in my class. As to what I know about boxing and sparring, papa is directly responsible for that. He claims that every man and boy should know enough about boxing to be able to defend himself if necessary; so he insisted on my taking boxing lessons from the best professors he could get. The old gentleman is a pretty clever boxer himself, but he kept me at it until I could box all around him, before he was satisfied. He used to say to me: 'Now, Frank, I don't want to hear of your picking a fuss with anybody just to show off; that isn't what I am having you taught to box for; but I want you to be handy enough with your fists so if a man insults you without any cause, you can whip him, if he weighs a ton.'

"I hoped that I would never have occasion to use the knowledge I had gained, for it looks to me to be the most foolish thing in the world for intelligent human beings to fight and pound each other like the lower animals, but I suppose when a fellow is insulted he is so mad, for the time being, that he doesn't care what he does. I know I was last night when that big fellow came out in the middle of the room and insulted

me before everybody. I would have fought him if he had weighed a ton, but I tell you I was awfully thankful that I knew something about defending myself. If I hadn't, I would probably have been half killed, for that big brute wouldn't have had any mercy on me."

"We were all ready to jump in and help if you had needed any," said Thad.

"It makes me shiver to think of the narrow escapes I've had," remarked Dick.

"When did you have any narrow escapes?" inquired Thad in surprise.

"Why, haven't you fellows heard me threaten to lick Frank two or three times?"

"That's so," said Tom. "You ought to be thankful enough for that to cook the remainder of the trip."

"By the time I have cooked a week, you will be willing to fight Frank to have me quit."

"Well, boys, this won't take up the traps," said Thad, arising from the table and picking up his rubber boots.

"That's so," said Tom. "And I suppose if we have time we might kill some ducks and squirrels to take along. We don't know where we'll stop next."

"We can't take very much fresh meat, can we? We haven't any ice now," Frank remarked.

"No, that's so; only enough for two or three days, but that won't matter. We can kill

enough floating down the river; ducks and geese are migrating now," replied Thad.

"Of course we can. I'll agree to keep the camp in meat with the 45 when we get out on the Mississippi," said Tom confidently.

"Yes, you will! The first Canada goose that looks at you will give you the shivers again, and you'll fall off the boat into the river. It will keep one man and a skiff busy retrieving you," remarked Dick.

"Nary a shiver. I've graduated."

"You will get shivers enough, getting off sandbars," remarked Thad dryly.

It was half past ten before Thad, Tom, and Frank started after the traps, leaving Dick to wash the dishes and get dinner, with Bruno for a side partner. Many of the traps had been set in other places more remote, making a longer circuit, so it was after two o'clock before the boys returned. Dinner over, they first took care of the fur caught that morning, and then Thad and Tom took their shotguns, Frank the 22, and Dick his fishing-rod, and all scattered in various directions to see what game and fish they could pick up. By sundown they had all returned; Tom and Thad with eight ducks, Frank with half a dozen fat squirrels, and Dick with a fine string of bass and crappies. Supper over, they started in on the regulation game of chess but, after playing fifteen minutes, Frank dropped asleep and fell over on the board, causing Dick to remark:

"That's one way to win a game of chess. I don't mind giving you odds of a rook and a couple of pawns, but I want to see my men."

Thad and Tom were almost as sleepy, so white and black resigned simultaneously on both boards, and the players tumbled into bed to make up the sleep lost on their previous night's dissipation.

"Boys, I don't know how the rest of you feel, but I am sorry to leave this little corner of the world," Thad remarked next morning, as he gazed from the windows of the Greased Lightning far up the quiet little stream flowing silently out from under the canopy of mosaic foliage.

"Yes, it's a great place to hunt and trap, to say nothing of fishing, but think of the fun we'll have shooting geese on the sandbars out on the old Mississippi," replied Tom.

"Shooting *at* geese," corrected Dick.

"No, sir. Shooting geese right in the diaphragm," maintained Tom.

"I don't imagine the geese will stay awake nights worrying about their diaphragms," replied Dick.

"I hate to leave this place, too; but probably we will find other good hunting grounds farther down. If we don't, as Tom said, we will have some fun out on the river," said Frank.

"Boys, I'll tell you a good name for this stream," said Thad, who was still gazing out of the window.

“What is it?”

“Tunnel Creek. The way it comes out of the woods into the Mississippi—it reminds me of the mouth of a tunnel.”

“All right; Tunnel Creek goes,” said Frank.

“I propose we call it Fawn Creek,” said Dick, looking innocently at Tom.

“I think Rice Creek would be better,” returned the latter.

Dick extended his hand. “Shake. Let Thad name the old creek.”

And they did.

It was nine o'clock before the boys were ready to start. They were about to cast off when somebody cried, “Hello,” and looking up they saw George Brown standing on the north bank loaded down with bundles.

“What the nation has that fellow got now?” queried Thad in a puzzled tone.

Tom laughed and pointed to Dick. That individual had one of the skiffs untied and was on his way across. “Can’t you guess?”

Then Thad laughed. “Of course, he thinks it’s something to eat.”

“You’ll find he isn’t far wrong, either. He can smell something to eat farther than a pointer can a woodchuck,” grinned Tom.

“Sorry to have you leave, boys,” said Brown, as he stepped on board, “but, as you said the other night, I suppose you must be getting down the river. Mother sent a little reminder

of your visit in the shape of a few doughnuts, pies, cookies, cake, etc. She thought they might come handy when you were floating down the river."

Thad and Tom glanced at each other and in spite of themselves broke into a hearty laugh. Young Brown looked puzzled and somewhat disconcerted at this strange reception of his mother's kindly offering.

But Thad extended his hand in a frank, cordial way and said: "Beg pardon, George, we were not laughing at you."

Then he explained Dick's noted fondness for something good to eat, and why he had hastened across after the bundles. Brown took in the situation at once, and his freckled, good-natured face broadened into a jolly laugh as he said:

"Good for Dick. That will tickle mother most to death. She likes to cook for folks that appreciate it. If she had known of Dick's weakness she would probably have sent twice as much."

"I wish she had known it," murmured Dick softly in such a heartfelt tone that everybody laughed, and Brown said:

"If you will hold the boat, Dick, I'll go back after more."

"No, thank you," replied Dick with a sigh; "we sail shortly."

A brief visit, a clasp of the hand, and their

new-found friend was set across to the other bank to return to the monotonous drudgery of farm work.

“‘Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and silence,’” Frank murmured half to himself as he watched young Brown disappear in the forest.

“What are you muttering about?” inquired Tom, as they were pushing off.

“Nothing,” replied Frank, as the Greased Lightning slowly swung out in the mouth of the little stream.

Commodore Kingston gave his orders, and the clumsy craft was soon wafted out upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi.

“It seems good to get out on the old river again, if that *was* a comfortable joint we just left,” remarked Tom, to whom, brought up on its banks, the sight of the big river was as the breath of life in his nostrils.

“It is a jolly old creek,” said Thad. “And look at the magnificent colorings of the trees running up that bluff. Isn’t it lovely? It isn’t everybody that has the opportunity to float down a picture gallery.”

“I suppose after I had made two or three trips down the river, I would be just as enthusiastic as you fellows are over it,” said Frank laughing.

“Of course you would; you couldn’t help it,” replied Tom. “You see, a person has respect

for this river; it has some stability about it. Now take such a dirty old creek as the Missouri for instance. That stream is either on a big tear, boiling out mud and washing away farms and towns and raising Cain on general principles because it's built that way, or it's sulking along fast asleep. It reminds me of an old toper. One day he is on a big drunk, raising Cain, and after his spree is over he is soggy and dead, sleeping it off. But the Mississippi goes right along in a respectable way attending to business, and when she rises, she doesn't tear things to pieces so."

"I suppose the explanation is that the Missouri has a swifter current," remarked Frank.

"Maybe it has," replied Tom. "But I'll always think it is just the natural cussedness of the critter. It was born that way just like some people; they can't help it."

"Like the fellow that Frank had the fun with the other night," suggested Dick.

"If we can keep from chipping off towheads and banging our nose into sandbars, we'll have a pretty good time floating along," said Thad.

"Say, Commodore, I'm purser I believe," said Tom, suddenly turning to Thad.

"Yes."

"Part of the purser's duties is seeing to the provisions, isn't it?"

"I believe so," replied Thad, wondering what Tom was driving at.

“Just what I thought. I’ll take the 45 and sit out here on the promenade deck where I can watch for provisions, and the rest of you fellows can watch for sandbars.”

Five minutes later Tom was comfortably seated with his big rifle across his lap, on the lookout for any kind of “provisions,” from a mud-turtle to a goose.

It was a beautiful autumn day, clear and cool with a very light north breeze, just enough to ruffle the surface of the water a little in patches here and there. The air was as exhilarating as wine. It made one feel—to quote Dick—“as though he didn’t care a continental whether school kept or not, especially when floating down the Mississippi.”

Pretty soon Dick brought out a chair and seated himself beside Tom with the remark:

“I haven’t lost any sandbars; and if you gentlemen will excuse me, I will burst into song.” And he struck up:

“ ‘We will trap the mink and musquash, chase
the joyous ringtailed coon,
Thro’ the woods and up a tree we’ll make him
hum,
Roast him brown with sweet potatoes rich with
gravy—what a boon,
Gather ’round and sniff the fragrance, yum-a
yum.’ ”

“What made you start in on the last verse?” said Tom, winking at Thad and Frank.

“Because it made me think of something good to eat. And by the way, Thomas, much obliged for mentioning it,” and Dick, giving Tom a slap on the leg, disappeared in the cabin.

He emerged presently with a huge slice of Mrs. Brown’s frosted cake, and, as he resumed his seat and began contentedly to munch it, remarked:

“That all goes to show that two heads are better than one, if one is a sap head. I wouldn’t have thought of that cake if you hadn’t spoken of eating. Much obliged.”

“Don’t mention it,” murmured Tom. “Anything I can do toward filling that bottomless hole in your stomach, I’ll do gladly.”

Just then the stentorian voice of the Commodore roared out:

“Man the sweeps there, before we knock the end off this towhead. Hump yourselves lively there. What’s the matter with you?—you move like a lot of mud-turtles with the sciatic rheumatism.”

Before Thad’s soul-inspiring harangue was ended, Tom and Dick had rushed to the sweeps; the Greased Lightning slowly sidled across the current, and missing the towhead by six feet, went booming along down the shore of the little island.

“Thad wouldn’t make a bad mate if he once got his profanity mill adjusted good,” observed Tom, as he seated himself with his rifle.

"The next trip I make," said Dick as he went to munching his cake again, "I'm going to be Commodore, if I can buy votes enough to elect me."

"You are too young to talk politics," replied Tom reprovingly, as he raised the rifle to his shoulder.

"What are you shooting at?" inquired Frank, coming out of the cabin.

"See the provisions over on that log?"

At the report of the rifle a mud-turtle flew up in the air about fifteen feet and splashed into the river, and an instant later a shower of turtles followed from the old log, as they hurriedly got out of sight.

"You broke up that convention pretty effectually," remarked Thad.

Half a mile farther down, a flock of ducks was drifting on the water. Tom tried them at two hundred yards, but failed to score. Then Frank brought out the 22, and he and Tom pecked away at everything they saw.

So all day they drifted, shooting, singing, laughing, chatting, and eating; happy and care-free. Ducks and geese passed them on their southern flight, some floating along at a high altitude, and others just skimming the surface of the water. Numerous flocks were in the river but the boys failed to get any with the rifles. A flock passed within easy shotgun range, but, although Tom and Frank emptied the rifles, no

mortality resulted among the ducks. Then Thad brought out a shotgun and set it convenient, in case any more should invite destruction.

After a while Thad and Frank got into a heated argument over the performance of Locksley, in splitting the willow with an arrow, before Prince John at the tournament. Suddenly they saw Dick snatch up the shotgun and pour both barrels into a flock of teal that dashed by, knocking five out of the bunch.

"Well, look at Dick; and here we are wasting our time arguing over something that probably never happened," cried Frank.

"If somebody didn't 'tend to business here, we wouldn't have anything to eat," said Dick with a look intended to be withering, as he untied a skiff and went to gather his ducks.

About an hour before sundown the Greased Lightning came out from between two islands and entered a broad stretch of river.

"We had better tie up for the night when we round that bar," said Thad, pointing to a wide sandbar extending out in the river from the west shore.

Suddenly Tom cried:

"Humped up Jupiter, boys; look at that bar!"

"I see 'em. Slide into the cabin easy, and bring the chairs," said Thad quietly.

Once inside, Thad took the field-glass and peeped out.

"Nineteen big Canada geese taking an afternoon nap," he announced after looking a moment.

"The first thing is, how near will we drift to the bar? We don't dare to work over," said Tom anxiously.

"And the next thing is, will the geese stay there?" said Dick.

"We shall have to trust to luck, that's all," replied Thad. "It looks as if the current would take us to within fifty yards of the bar, and the geese are all snoozing apparently, except one old gander. We can't reach them with the shotguns, anyhow, for they are forty yards or more out on the bar."

It seemed to the young hunters in their eagerness to get a shot at the geese, that the current was unusually sluggish. Dick peeped slyly out of the window at the geese, fidgeted about impatiently two or three minutes, and broke out:

"This old tub isn't going at the rate of a mile a week, and I know it. The river will freeze up before we get to the geese."

"Don't get impatient," said Thad; "we are going slow but sure, like the traditional mud-turtle."

"Mud-turtle be blowed! A mud-turtle is a race-horse compared to this craft," grumbled Dick.

Meanwhile, instead of complaining like the impatient, headstrong Dick, Tom was engaged

in cleaning the 45 and filling the magazine with fresh shells, "so he wouldn't have any excuse for missing," as he said.

"I don't suppose it's any use to try them with the shotguns, we haven't anything bigger than number 1 shot. I wish we had an old cylinder bore muzzle-loader and some wire cartridges; we would make things hump," said Thad.

"We'll make them hump hard enough with the rifles, whether we kill any or not," replied Tom.

"Tom Evans, if you don't get a goose out of that flock, I'll heave you overboard, all alone," said Dick severely.

Tom grinned good-naturedly but said nothing. He was used to Dick.

The current of the Mississippi, like the mills of the gods, is not particularly noted for speed; but in the expressive slang of the day, "it gets there just the same." Thus the Greased Lightning slowly swung along down the sandbar, with four pairs of very sharp, watchful eyes aboard. When nearly opposite the geese, a feeling of uneasiness was manifest in their ranks. One after another, a long, graceful neck went up in the air; and a moment later, every goose was on its feet watching the noiseless houseboat drifting by, with sharp, suspicious eyes. It was quite apparent from their uneasy actions that the wary Canadas did not intend remaining much longer in that vicinity.

Tom whispered: "They're going to fly in a minute. I had better step to the door and give it to 'em."

"Yes, shoot," replied Thad.

Tom opened the door slightly and, taking a quick aim, fired.

A great flapping of wings and a confused gabbling followed, as the geese lifted their great bodies from the sand and started off in a south-westerly direction, evidently lamenting the fact that they hadn't departed a little sooner. Tom threw in another shell, flung the door wide open, and stepping out on deck, began sending lead after the departing wildfowl in a way that would have made a Maxim turn green with envy.

Dick, impatient and impulsive, was outside in a second, slapping his leg and yelling:

"Sock it to 'em, Tom! Sock it to 'em! Give 'em every bullet in the magazine!"

Tom pumped away until the hammer snapped with no report, and he knew the gun was empty.

"That's every shot in the locker," he announced. "What's the casualties?"

"There are two out where they were sitting and another one 'way down on the bar. You killed the lower one at the third shot," said Thad.

"The lower one isn't dead, either. Get your shotgun and come on, Dick," cried Tom, and in a trice he and Dick were after the goose that

was making frantic efforts to reach the water, although badly disabled. The boys arrived just in time for Dick to give it a quietus with the shotgun, as it was getting into the river. Then they rowed up the bar and picked up the other two and returned, catching the Greased Lightning just as Thad and Frank were sliding her in toward the other shore, where they were to tie up for the night.

The houseboat was made fast to the bank and supper started, for Dick was complaining of being "hollow clear to his boots."

"Why didn't you shoot with the 22, Frank?" asked Tom. "You might have hit one."

Frank smiled. "I did shoot. I saw there wasn't room in the door for both of us, so I slid up the window and shot through that, just as they raised."

Tom looked incredulous. "Is that right? I didn't know you shot at all."

"Frank is right," said Thad. "He told me about it after you and Dick left, and I put down the window. I shouldn't be surprised if you found a 22 bullet in one of those geese, either."

"It's easy to tell," said Tom. He examined the wounds on the birds, and, sure enough, one of the geese had been plumped fairly through by a 22 ball. Extending his hand, he said, "Glad of it, Frank. Shake."

When Tom went in to help Dick prepare supper; he gave that worthy a nudge in the ribs.

"I guess some other folks 'tend to business occasionally, when it comes to gathering in provisions."

"Huh. It was just a scratch, and then I had to kill the cripples," Dick retorted, as he went on slicing off the breasts of several fat, juicy teal to be broiled for supper.

"Of course. Any old plug can shoot cripples."

"Boys, I'm pretty hungry," warned Frank, putting his head in the door.

"Don't mention it," said Dick. "I'm a living allegory of hunger. But just be patient and we'll have a feast fit for the—I'll have to ask that gentleman's name again that you used to cook for, Tom."

"The Ahkoond of Swat."

"That's it. The Ahsoond of Quat."

In half an hour Dick came out where Frank and Thad were enjoying the sunset.

"Supper is now ready in the dining-car. Please remember there will be no speech making or toasts responded to until we get something in our stomachs."

"Anything good for supper?" inquired Thad, as they went in.

"Well, here's a platter of fried black bass, and a platter of fried teal breasts, and potatoes boiled with the jackets on, and coffee guaranteed to float a 45 ball, and bread and butter, and a jar of mamma's preserves, bless her brown

eyes, and a dish-pan full of Mrs. Brown's pies and cakes and cookies, and—and—but anything you don't see, ask for," and Dick made a systematic attack on the provisions.

"Boys, wouldn't it be a wise idea to keep our eye on Dick, and when he eats about so long—say a couple of hours, to tie his hands? We don't want him to explode," remarked Tom.

"He is safe, boys," replied Thad, as Dick proceeded to decorate his plate with a pound and a half bass, two big, mealy potatoes, and the crisp, fat breasts of a couple of teal. "I used to worry about him considerable, but his stomach is like a rubber bag, no limit to the expansion."

"I wouldn't have missed this trip for four dollars a minute," said Frank, looking around contentedly, his jaws going at a two-forty gait.

"No, nor four dollars a second; whether we hit any sandbars or not," replied Dick.

But even the appetites of hungry hunters can be satisfied, and when the table resembled the wreck of a Kansas cyclone, the boys ceased operations. Thad and Frank washed and wiped the dishes, and the boys soon settled down to a double game of chess.

They had played perhaps an hour, when suddenly an ear-splitting scream came from the woods that caused every man to look at his neighbor inquiringly. The scream seemed to be within thirty feet of them.

“Boys, I’ll bet that’s a panther. I’ve read they have a scream like a woman,” whispered Frank, his face paling.

“Sh—keep still a minute,” and Thad raised his hand warningly.

A moment later the cry came again—shrill, quavering, and blood-curdling to a tenderfoot. Thad and Tom looked at each other and laughed.

“Proceed with the game,” Tom remarked with a grin.

“What is it?” Frank asked wonderingly.

“A screech owl. They used to screech Dick and me to sleep when we were children; but they scared the life out of us at first before we found out what they were,” said Thad.

“Learn a lesson from that bird, my son,” remarked Dick.

“What kind of a lesson?” asked Frank.

“That making a great noise in the world doesn’t necessarily prove that you amount to anything. That bit of wisdom applies to birds, animals, and men. You can ponder it over at you leisure; in the meantime—check!” And the game proceeded once more.

CHAPTER VII.

DICK AND THE YELLOW CAT.

By seven o'clock next morning our young voyagers had disposed of a hearty breakfast and were ready to start on their southward journey again.

"If we don't have any bad luck such as adverse winds, roosting on sandbars, and so forth, we ought to make twenty-five or thirty miles to-day," Thad remarked.

"We will suppose we are Joliet and Marquette exploring the Mississippi," said Frank.

"I wouldn't mind running against a big catfish, as Parkman says they did when they struck the river at the mouth of the Wisconsin, if we could hook the critter and have him tow us down the river," said Dick.

"If it happened to be one of the large sizes, we might get towed onto a sandbar, or out in the woods," replied Tom.

“Do catfish grow very large in the Mississippi?” inquired Frank.

“I should say so. Some of them are as big as a yearling steer.”

“How much do they weigh?”

“They have been caught up to two hundred and fifty pounds that I know of,” said Tom.

“Gee! They are young whales, aren’t they?” said Frank.

“Say, boys,” said Thad, “I’ll tell you what let’s do. When we get out in the channel, let’s tie a couple of the biggest hooks on that big fish-line, fasten them to cane poles, and let them drift along with us. We can cork up a couple of empty jugs for floats, and any kind of meat will do for bait. Catfish will swallow anything from a muskrat to a fence post.”

“Good idea, and it won’t cost anything to try it,” replied Tom approvingly.

A few moments later the sweeps, aided by the current, carried the Greased Lightning out from the shadows of the forest onto the gentle bosom of the Mississippi. When well out in the channel, the boys took soundings and found from ten to fourteen feet of water.

A pair of the largest hooks and lines were tied to cane poles which were fastened one at each end of the boat, so the poles were just above the water. Seven or eight feet from the hooks the lines were tied to the handles of empty corked jugs, which acted as floats, en-

abling the boys to see more easily when they had a bite. The hooks were baited with large pieces of meat, and everything was ready for the killing of a big catfish.

Then the boys settled down to the pleasant and profitable occupation of loafing, watching the jugs, and discussing the wide river and its various features of interest, not the least of which was the superb coloring of the leaves that draped the forest-crowned bluffs. Tom and Frank brought out the rifles and proceeded to make things interesting for mud-turtles, crows, hawks, and ducks that showed up.

The Greased Lightning had drifted half a mile when Dick suddenly cried out: "Boys, this hook has caught on something; probably an old sunken tree. See the jug go down."

"Maybe it is one of those big catfish you fellows have been stuffing me about," said Frank.

"Catfish nothing! Fish don't bite that way. Why the jug went down just as if somebody had fastened on to it with a rope and windlass. It's a water-soaked log or a sunken tree, all right enough."

"Won't it break the hook or line?" inquired Frank.

"Something will have to come when the boat drifts far enough," replied Dick.

"Say, Dick, your snag is moving," called Tom.

"Not very far I guess. You can't fool your pap that way," Dick replied.

“Just the same it is moving,” said Thad. “You had better get into the skiff, unfasten the pole, and go out to investigate. It doesn’t act like a respectable Mississippi snag.”

Dick was as stubborn as he was impulsive. He had made up his mind from the first that it was a snag, and he was loath to change his decision; but when the jug was out to the limit of the line and the pole began to bend under the strain, Dick had to admit that the proceeding was a little off color for an ordinary snag; and springing into a skiff, took the pole and started out to see what caused his snag to act so. He pulled hand over hand on the line until out where the identity of his snag was concealed under several feet of water. Once there he pulled with all his strength, trying to bring it to the surface, but he might just as well have pulled on the corner of a brick house. Then he was more convinced than ever that it was a genuine snag, and he was greatly disgusted to think the boys had caused him to partially change his mind.

“This is an exceedingly lively fish,” he remarked sarcastically. “You are a bright lot, you fellows. Just because the boat swung over a little, you thought this old log was a whale swimming off with you. You ought to have your heads examined.”

At this juncture, however, Dick’s satirical eloquence received a check, for the snag suddenly started up stream at a fairly lively gait,

towing skiff, Dick, and all to that gentleman's great surprise.

The other boys roared with laughter, and Tom sang out:

"Good-bye, Dick. We'll be on the watch for you in the spring when you come drifting along down with the ice."

"Say, Dick, is that saw-log from Beef Slough or Catfish Bay?" yelled Thad.

Dick, however, was too much astonished and interested to reply to these facetious remarks. After towing him up stream some distance, the motive power evidently discovered the fact that it was hard work, and turning about, started for St. Louis.

As Dick holding a taut line passed the Greased Lightning, he called out: "Any message you fellows want to send down home?"

"Yes. Tell them Mrs. Brown's cake and pie were just delicious; we enjoyed them greatly. We'll probably get a chance to see what they taste like now," cried Tom.

"Gosh all hemlock! I forgot all about that cake and pie. I can't leave them for an old fish or a whale. Say, Tom, get the other skiff and come out here and relieve me; it's just fun."

"No, thanks. I'm enjoying myself hugely."

"What do you think Dick has got hold of, anyhow?" asked Frank.

"The chances are it's a big catfish, though it

might be a rubber-nose sturgeon or some other variety of fish. Whatever it is it must be a whale to haul Dick and that boat around over the river so easily," replied Tom.

"Maybe it's a sea serpent," hazarded Frank.

"Hardly."

"Don't you ever have sea serpent stories out here on the river?"

"No; people have to breathe salt air before they can be big enough liars to tell sea serpent yarns," replied Thad.

"Dick's horse has balked again," said Tom. "Say, Dick, have you got a glimpse of him yet?"

"Nary a glimpse. Seems to be averse to society for some reason."

"Pretty husky saw-log, isn't it?" called Thad.

"Oh, you close your pie trap," retorted Dick independently, as his captive got up steam once more and started on.

"Shall I come out and play him awhile?" asked Frank.

"I'm afraid you haven't skill enough. It takes an old-timer to play this fish."

"That's so. It requires about as much skill as it does to hold one end of a clothes-line in the back yard," remarked Tom.

"You come out here and you will think you have both ends of a clothes-line."

"Is there any show to shoot him?" inquired Tom.

“Not unless you want to dive down in the water with a gun,” replied Dick.

His captive slowed up a little, and finally stopped. Dick pulled until his arms ached, trying to get it to the surface, but in vain. Then that young gentleman got hostile and proceeded to speak his mind to his mates in a forcible if not elegant manner. The flood gates of his oratory opened to the limit as he pointed out to the boys the error of their ways in allowing him to be dragged around over the river by a big catfish while they sat comfortably on the boat and egged it on.

When Dick had delivered himself of this burst of eloquence he looked up to see how his comrades took his scathing rebuke. He fully expected to see a crestfallen-looking lot of boys, but to his utter disgust each of the three rascals was comfortably seated, munching a big slice of jelly cake; and when Dick ended his diatribe they all struck up:

“ ‘We’ll be happy we’ll be gay, care and trouble
get away,
And we’ll chase the juicy catfish from his lair.
We will eat him tail and feathers, and we’ll top
off with a bass,
And we’ll pull the royal mallard from the air.’ ”

Dick was inclined to get mad at first, but the humorous side of the absurd situation—being pulled around the river by a fish, or, in other words, being played by a fish instead of play-

ing the fish according to custom—gradually dawned upon him and he laughed in spite of himself.

“You fellows think you are smart, don’t you? That is all a person might expect from an ignorant lot of roustabouts, working for thirteen dollars a month and board; but I’ll get even with you, sure as my name’s Dick Kingston.”

“Your name will be Dennis if you don’t land that fish pretty soon,” replied Tom.

“We are getting awful good board, Dick,” called Thad; “only trouble, the jelly isn’t quite thick enough on this cake.”

“You can’t blame me; I wanted to help but you insisted that I didn’t have enough skill,” said Frank consolingly.

At that moment Dick gave a particularly vicious pull at his captive, the line broke, and the fish went one way and the fisherman the other. Head over heels backward Dick went, the light skiff dipped and filled with water and in a second more the valiant fisherman was floundering in the chilly water of the Mississippi. Thad and Tom had the other skiff loose in a trice and went to Dick’s assistance. That gentleman, wet through, chilled, and disgusted, began, when the boys hauled him into the skiff, to anathematize fish, skiffs, boys, houseboats, and everything else, in boy fashion.

“Tut, tut, Dick, don’t swear; you won’t catch any fish,” said Tom with a grin, as he took the

painter of the submerged skiff and Thad pulled for the Greased Lightning.

"Drat the fish; I'd like to put a 45-70 through his backbone," said Dick vengefully, as he climbed aboard and hurried to change his clothes.

"Too bad we lost the fish. I would like to have had a glimpse of him and seen what he looks like," said Frank regretfully.

"The fish isn't lost. We'll get him all right; don't you see the jug bobbing around out there?" said Thad, pointing over the water.

"That's so. I didn't think of the jug's telling us where he was."

Just then Dick poked his head out of the door.

"Don't you critters dare to go after that fish without me. I'm going to help capture him if I drown for it."

"All right, Dick, we'll wait for you," said Tom, grinning at the other boys. "Only don't wait to eat all the cake and pie."

Dick was soon into dry clothing, and seizing the big rifle in one hand and a chunk of cake in the other, he cried out:

"Now take me out to that old catfish and pull him to the top of the water, and I'll bore fifteen holes in his blamed carcass. I'll show him that he waked up the wrong passenger."

"Come on, Tom, and we'll help the boy get his fish; Frank, you can run the Greased Lightning a few minutes, I guess," said Thad.

"Sure thing. I can get it onto a sandbar if anybody can," Frank replied.

"Come on, Tom, or do we have to wait for Dick to eat that piece of cake?"

"Go ahead with your rat killing; I'm with you. Do you suppose it takes me a week to eat a bit of cake the size of my thumb nail?" said Dick, starting for the large skiff.

"Good Heavens, have we another Falstaff?" cried Thad.

Tom, whose Shakespearian education had been neglected replied:

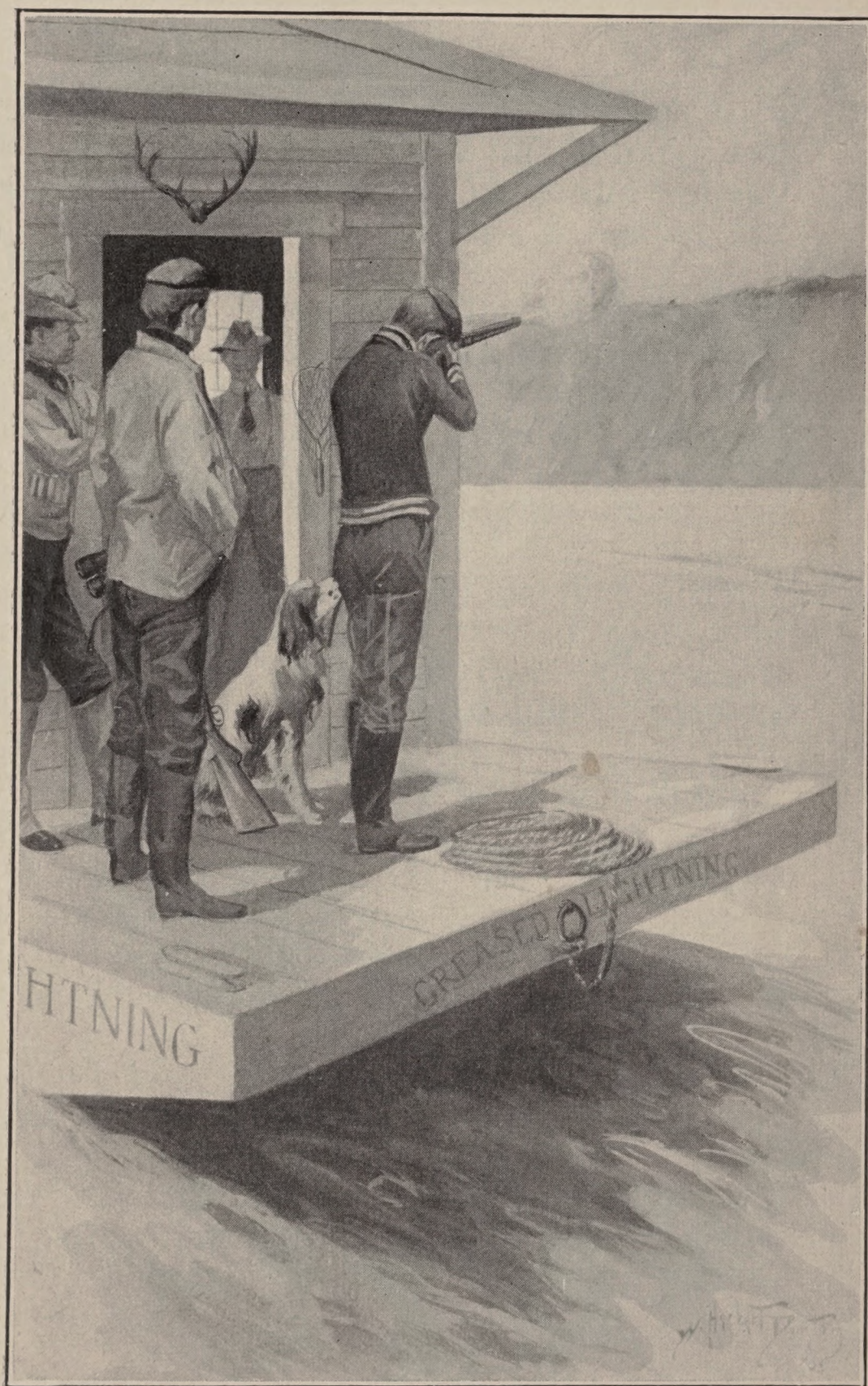
"I don't know what you call him, but if that piece of cake wasn't big as a brick, I'll eat the jug."

The boys pulled out to where the tell-tale jug was slowly moving through the water. Then Thad and Tom went to the stern, Thad saying quietly, as he took the jug by the handle:

"Now, Dick, stand ready with the rifle and if we get him to the top of the water, bore a hole through his backbone right back of the neck. No use to shoot at his brains, he hasn't any; be careful and don't shoot us."

"Pull away, I'll be careful," Dick replied coolly.

Thad and Tom began to pull slowly and steadily. The big fish was evidently tired from the exertion of dragging Dick and the skiff to and fro, and allowed the boys to draw him to the surface. Just as the huge, yellow body ap-



Quickly following the report of the rifle, the eager watchers saw the animal make a short side jump
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peared in sight and Dick threw up the rifle to shoot, there was a slash of the mighty tail, throwing spray all over the boys, and the captive disappeared from sight in a twinkling, taking the jug along with him.

"What's the matter with you fellows? Can't two of you hold a sunfish with a clothes-line?" inquired Dick ironically.

"It seems not. You can come and help hold the clothes-line if you want to, and I'll do the shooting," replied Tom, wiping the water from his face.

"Not much. I've had all the fun I want; go ahead and try again," replied Dick, grinning audibly at Thad's and Tom's discomfort.

"Did you get a glimpse of him?" inquired Thad.

"Yes, and he was as big as a smokehouse," said Dick.

"Why didn't you shoot? We can't hold him here a week," said Tom.

"No, it seems not," said Dick demurely, "but you see I've got to have time to pull the trigger."

"Don't brag any more about your being a quick woodcock shot," remarked Thad.

"Huh, a woodcock is a small snail compared to the way this critter went out of sight," replied Dick, "but just get him up once more and I'll blow a hole in the water anyhow; maybe I can stun him."

The jug soon bobbed up a few yards away, and the boys went cautiously after it. They soon were giving another exhibition of derrick work. The instant he caught a glimpse of the yellowish mass, Dick banged away. There was another commotion, another splash, and the boys were alone, Tom and Thad ruefully looking for a towel or handkerchief to get the water off their faces and clothes. The impact of Dick's charge on the water and the splash of the fish when he went down had given Thad and Tom a moderate shower bath.

"What's the matter, didn't Dick hit him?" inquired Thad after the water was out of his eyes so he could see.

"Guess not," replied Tom. "What's the matter with you, boy; can't you hit a kerosene barrel at four feet? You are liable to lose your job," said Tom severely, turning to Dick.

"I did hit him," maintained Dick stoutly. "I bored an inch hole right through his head, but that's all the good it did; might as well shoot a hole in an inch plank and expect it to die."

"We must have him hooked awfully good or he would have broken loose with all this fighting and powwow," said Thad.

"There's the jug up again; give me another show and I'll see if I can get a welt at his backbone," said Dick.

"This fun is getting a little monotonous; try and finish him next time, Dick," said Tom, as they pulled up to the jug again.

Dick's shot seemed to have discouraged the huge fish, for it allowed the boys to drag it to the surface, where it lay like a log. Dick quickly sent a 45 ball through its spine and the great yellow mass lay motionless on the water.

"Gee, but ain't he a socker! We'll have to tow him to the boat; we can never pull him in the skiff," said Thad, surveying their fish in astonishment.

"That's the best way; in fact it's the only way I can think of. You hang on to the line, Thad, and I'll row," replied Tom, taking the oars.

"Why didn't we think to bring the gaff? There is one on the boat," said Thad suddenly.

"That's so; I never thought of it," replied Tom. "Dick was so anxious to shoot it though, I don't suppose he would have taken the gaff anyhow."

"We'll need it to help land the fish," said Thad. "Frank," he called over the water, "have the gaff ready."

Frank disappeared in the cabin and as the boys came slowly alongside, towing the big fish, laughing and joking, he came out on deck looking red and uncomfortable.

"Say, Thad," he blurted out, "what does a gaff look like? I wouldn't know one from a rail fence."

The boys stopped and stared at this confession of ignorance, then Tom and Dick burst out laughing.

"Well, I'll be switched; that spooney don't know what a gaff is. O Lordy!" and Tom went off in a fresh convulsion of merriment while Frank got a little redder.

Thad handed the line to Tom and sprang on deck, saying severely:

"That's enough of that. You two smarties let up or I'll put you both in irons for the balance of the day. You ought to have more sense than to laugh at a person for what he doesn't know. A fellow can't be expected to know everything. Frank could take you chaps to New York City and in five minutes make monkeys and simpletons of both of you."

Frank cast a grateful look at Thad for his friendly interference, and Tom, who had never been in a large city in his life, sobered down with the remark: "I guess that's no dream either; I would be lost in a big city."

Dick, who was always ready to atone for his impulsiveness when it wounded any one's feelings, said penitently, as he stepped on board and extended his hand to his blushing comrade:

"Beg your pardon, Frank, for our rudeness. Thad is right, as he always is. Tom and I were a couple of chumps to poke fun at you and act wise just because we happened to know something you didn't. If we ever happen in your city, you will serve us just right by paying us back in our own coin."

"Oh, that's all right," returned Frank, his

distressed expression giving place to the old happy look. "I am to blame for not knowing what a gaff is, for I have run across the word lots of times in stories, but never took the trouble to look it up and see what it meant."

(Youthful reader, stick a pin here. When you find a word new to you, instead of skipping it or guessing at the meaning, consult a dictionary at once, or if none is at hand, jot down the strange word and look it up at your earliest convenience. That bit of trouble may save you some ludicrous expressions and much vexation of spirit in after years.)

In a minute Thad came out with the gaff, and hooking the big cat in the gills, cried out:

"Get hold of here, Frank."

It required the strength of both boys to pull the monster on deck, and it *was* a monster; a huge, ill-shapen mass of flesh of a dull yellowish color.

"Jumping Jackson! but isn't he a whale though?" cried Tom.

"Gee-miminy, but it's a buster! It's got a mouth like a rain-barrel," said Dick in astonishment.

"Or a cellar door," suggested Frank.

"Say, boys," mused Tom, contemplating the enormous head and mouth, "I'd like to have this fellow alive and watch him and Dick eat a race; from the size of the opening in his mug the critter ought to put up a husky race."

Thad shook his head. "No use; Dick would eat all around him. This critter is all mouth, but Dick is all stomach, and that is what counts."

"You two fellows must be a near relative of that catfish; you seem to be mostly all mouth," retorted Dick, and with that shot he disappeared in the cabin, soon emerging with a piece of pie.

"Now we have caught this fellow, what in the world will we do with him? We don't want to eat him, or at least I don't," remarked Tom.

"I should say not. I would as lief eat a snake," said Dick in disgust.

"Aren't they good for food?" inquired Frank.

"Some folks eat them," replied Thad, "but these big, yellow fellows are awfully coarse and rank. They feed on everything from a rotten muskrat to the corpse of a baby."

"Ugh, excuse me," said Frank, shuddering.

"I'll tell you what we will do with it, boys," said Thad.

"What?"

Thad pointed down the river about a mile. "Do you see that church spire? Evidently there is a little town. We will stop and sell the gentleman to somebody. If there are any fishermen, we can sell it to them for something."

"That's the best way to get rid of it I guess, besides we'll get a little something out of the old fellow," said Tom.

"What will he weigh?" asked Frank, survey-

ing the huge, yellow mass with a feeling of repulsion.

Thad guessed one hundred and fifty, Tom one hundred and seventy-five, and Dick one hundred and ninety.

The boys put out the lines again while drifting along down to the village, and caught two channel cats, weighing six to eight pounds each.

"These blue gentlemen are all right, and we'll have a big slice of them rolled in corn meal and fried for dinner soon as we pass that town; the sooner fish are cooked after they are out of the water the better," said Dick, looking wise as he eyed the blue cats hungrily.

The Greased Lightning drifted along slowly but surely. When near the landing the boys saw a couple of fishermen cleaning the morning's catch.

"Hello. Want to buy any fish?" cried Thad, as they came alongside.

One of the men looked up. "I dunno. What kind you got?"

Thad touched the big fish with his foot.

The fisherman laughed and said: "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?" said Thad, smiling.

"It's enough of the kind. What do you want for it?"

"Two cents a pound the way it lies."

The man said something to his partner in a low tone. The latter nodded.

“All right; we’ll take it.”

“Got any scales handy?” inquired Thad.

The fisherman pointed to a small shanty a few feet distant, upon which was emblazoned in flaming letters: “FISH MARKET.”

The big cat was put on the scales and balanced up one hundred and sixty-two pounds.

“It’s the biggest cat I ever got hold of on the upper river,” the boys heard the fisherman remark to his partner, after he had paid Thad his three dollars and twenty-four cents.

“What do you do with those big fish?” Frank ventured to remark as they were pushing off.

“Oh, smoke ’em, cut ’em up into steak and sell it for smoked halibut or smoked sturgeon or whatever kind of smoked fish sells the best; we ain’t particular what we call it,” replied the fisherman with a grin and a wink. And the boys floated on.

“I thought you fellows told me catfish sometimes weighed two hundred and fifty pounds,” remarked Frank after they were out in the current and under way again.

“They do,” replied Tom, “but those biggest fellows are down in the lower river where the water is deeper. This one is about as big as they catch them up here.”

“I thought everybody out in the country was honest, but that old fisherman didn’t talk very honest, selling catfish for sturgeon or halibut,” said Frank innocently.

The other three boys looked at each other and grinned.

Dick said gravely:

"That is one of the tricks of the trade; but, my son, I warn you to revise your opinion of the honesty of country people; it is altogether too old-fashioned. The reason country folks are not as mean as city people is because their wits haven't got sharpened down to such a fine point; but they are an awful good second, and growing faster than pumpkins in June. Look at Thad and Tom there; jewing a couple of homesick boys down on this boat until they got it for next to nothing."

"They didn't have to take it unless they wanted to," retorted Thad.

"No, that's so," admitted Dick. "I suppose business is business and the devil gets the hindmost. Anyhow, as far as I've got in this world it seems to be a dog-eat-dog sort of a country, and the one with the biggest stomach, so to speak, gets the most."

"Then you will be provided for plenty," interrupted Tom.

Dick's advice to Frank, and his dissertation on the wickedness and deceit of humanity in general, was delivered with the most dense gravity, but Tom's remark broke up the meeting. Everybody laughed, Dick included.

"I should think you fellows would give my stomach a rest."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't give it a rest yourself," replied Thad.

"That makes me think, by the time we get these fish skinned, dressed, and cooked, it will be time to eat again; I'll get the nippers," and Dick went after that useful article.

"Here is an example of how history repeats itself," remarked Frank, as he watched with absorbing interest Dick and Tom going through the process of "skinning the cat."

"How do you mean?" asked Thad.

"Why, you know, Joliet and Marquette collided with a big catfish when they struck the Mississippi, and we did the same thing this morning."

"Dick did the collide-act mostly," said Tom.

"Dick does everything mostly; if I didn't get a move on me we wouldn't get half enough to eat," remarked that worthy energetically, as he tore strips of tough skin from the catfish.

"Let's see," mused Thad. "Joliet and Marquette explored this old creek in June, 1673, a little over two hundred years ago. How would you like to have floated down then? Great times, eh Frank?"

"I am afraid the times would have been a little too great for comfort with the woods full of panthers, bears, wolves, and other wild animals. I think I prefer the trip now; more comfort and less game. A person isn't shivering all the time for fear of getting chewed up or scalped."

“Tom and his 45-70 would have been daisies then, wouldn’t they? If he gets scared to death and falls off a log and runs his gun in the mud at sight of a little fawn, wouldn’t he be a lovely crawfish to have along on a trip like those fellows took?” observed Dick, giving Tom a sly poke.

“There now, that will do, son; run in and cook your catfish, and you might cook a little rice, too—if you have washtubs enough to hold it,” returned Tom calmly.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUAIL SHOOTING ON THE ISLAND.

When the savory odor of frying fish floated through the houseboat, the boys all agreed that it made them hungry, even if it was a channel cat. They were passing down the west side of a large, wooded island at the time, and the clean, sandy beach sloping down to the water looked so inviting that Thad said:

“Let’s land on this island, eat our dinner, and gather some wild grapes. There are oceans of them and they ought to be good now after the frosts.”

Everybody, down to the slush cook, agreed with a shout, and soon the Greased Lightning was sliding across the current and quickly grated on the sand. Then Dick announced dinner and the boys fell to, with the keen zest of youthful appetites sharpened to a razor-edge by the crisp autumn air. Thad, as usual, finished the meal first, and stepping outside remarked:

“Where is Bruno? He must be ashore exploring.”

He whistled several times, but no Bruno appeared. Springing ashore Thad ran up the bank and disappeared. In two minutes he came running down and sprang aboard, his eyes sparkling.

“Say, boys, Bruno has got something. He is on a point stiff as a workbench. Just saw his tail through the top of the weeds. Get the guns and come on.”

“What do you think it is?” Frank asked, as they made a dash for the fowling-pieces.

“Either quail or pheasant. Number 8’s, Frank,” and Thad hurriedly grabbed the gun and a pocketful of shells.

“Go ahead, boys, I’ll be there in a minute; I can’t leave this fish just yet,” called Dick, as Thad, Tom, and Frank disappeared over the bank. Bruno, graceful as a marble image, stood in a little clearing, his back and tail just visible above the weeds. Occasionally he slowly turned his head to see if the boys were coming.

“Steady, boy,” and Thad walked quietly up to him. “Easy now; go on. Be ready, boys.”

Bruno took a step forward, when with a roaring whirr, a cloud of quail took wing and darted through the open timber. Then Dick heard a fusillade that caused him to drop a crisp piece of fish and grab his gun.

“How many did we get?” asked Thad when everybody had emptied his gun.

"I killed one that I know of," said Tom, who was hurriedly putting in fresh shells for fear another quail might appear.

"I saw two or three fall, but I don't know who killed them; I was badly flustered—there were so many of them. I never saw such a swad before," said Frank, laughing.

Bruno retrieved four dead birds just as Dick's round face, shining with fish-oil and contentment, appeared above the bank.

"Hold on, I want some quail on toast, too."

"How did you manage to tear yourself away from that fish?" asked Thad.

"I couldn't stand the pressure to hear all those guns, and most of the fish is inside of me anyhow. How many did you get?" The boys showed four birds. "That's good for a starter. Did you mark them down?"

"Yes, they only went about a hundred yards in the open timber," Tom replied.

"Come on then and we'll have quail on toast for supper," Dick called. As they neared the place where the birds had dropped, Bruno stopped and pointed.

"It's your turn, Dick."

Whirr! bang! and Dick dropped his quail. Whirr! bang! and he grassed another.

"It beats all, how a duck-legged animal with his face all fish-grease like you, can shoot," quoth Tom.

"I don't shoot with my face or my legs," and Dick coupled up his reloaded gun.

"Try it next, Frank," said Thad.

Bruno was moving cautiously, half pointing all the time.

Whirr! a quail darted up. Frank threw up his gun and vainly tried to get aim at the fleeing mark, but the bird wouldn't stay in one place long enough. Whirr! another bunch of brown flashed away. Again Frank threw up his gun, then he lowered it and laughed in a chagrined way. "No use, boys; I can't get aim on those chaps; they don't stay in one place long enough."

"Get aim nothing. You can't expect to get aim. Just throw the gun to your face and point it somewhere in the direction of a brown streak and whale away," said Dick.

"Is that the way? I supposed you wanted to see the bird over the sights."

"You may want to, but you don't have time. Life is too short to waste it in shutting the left eye and trying to get a dead bead on a quail that isn't in range more than five seconds. You wouldn't get a quail in seven years if you waited to see it over the sights," Dick replied.

"Dick is right, Frank. You must throw the gun to your face and shoot whether the gun is on the bird or not. They are such quick little rascals that you don't have time to better your aim. If you miss, charge it to experience and try to do better next time. Practice makes perfect after you are on the right track."

Frank laughed. "All right; I'll blow a hole in the air next time whether I get aim or not. But it is Tom's turn now; I'll scare all the quail out of the country before you fellows kill enough for supper. Better go ahead and get what you want before I make a show of myself again."

"There are plenty of quail. I don't doubt the island is alive with them," said Thad.

Just then three birds whirred up, and Tom missed with his first barrel and killed with the second. Thad reversed this, and killed with his first, missing with the second barrel.

"Can't any of us get them every time, Frank," he said as he inserted fresh shells.

The quail were well scattered, and every few moments one or two darted up at their feet.

Frank tried again and again, but only succeeded in shooting the air full of holes. Finally he knocked a bird down with his second barrel and at once grew a foot and said so.

"Wait a minute and you will shrink that foot and another one on top of it," remarked Dick.

And he was right. Quail seemed to be everywhere, darting up squarely in front of them. Frank shot whenever a bird was near him or the other guns were empty. After emptying his gun a dozen times with no results, he laughed and said:

"You are a prophet, Dick. I've shrunk to four feet now, but it's great fun."

“Keep slamming away,” said Thad, “and don’t be the least bit anxious whether you hit or miss.”

The boys walked along fifty yards without seeing anything, then Bruno suddenly turned to a graven image.

“Here’s another bevy, boys. Bruno acts unusually interested,” said Thad in a low tone.

He had barely spoken when a number of big, brown birds darted up and went through the trees like rockets. Tom, Dick, and Thad let go every barrel, but Frank’s mind failed to act quickly enough and he didn’t shoot.

“You must be quicker on the trigger, Frank,” called Thad.

“I know it,” said Frank, looking chagrined, “but they got up so quick it knocked me off my pins; what were they?”

“Pheasants,” replied Tom.

As he spoke, a belated straggler sprang up and darted away before any one had time to change shells.

“Paste him, Frank; knock the stuffing out of him,” yelled Dick.

Frank cut loose and scored a miss. He smashed away with the other barrel just as the big bird went through a small tree top sixty yards distant, and had the unutterable joy of seeing it crash down through the branches.

“How is that for a tenderfoot?” he cried, his face all smiles.

"Bully for Frank," shouted Dick.

"Maybe he did better than the rest of us, but I killed my bird," said Thad.

"I killed mine dead as a smelt," said Tom.

"I smashed the daylights out of mine; he fell right against that little birch tree over there," and Dick indicated the tree with his finger.

"You did in a horn. I killed that bird," said Tom indignantly.

"Not by a jugful. That fellow dropped when my gun cracked," Dick maintained stoutly.

"Hold on there, you fellows. I want a finger in that pie. I killed that bird myself," said Thad.

The three boys stared at each other a moment defiantly, then a light dawned on them, and they all laughed. They had all shot at the same bird with the first barrel.

"That's a pretty note for you fellows to shoot at my bird," said Dick.

"Too bad, Dick, but it ought to be awful dead," replied Thad.

"I feel mighty scrumptious over that scratch shot of mine; if I don't watch myself I'll be bragging worse than Dick used to over his woodcock that Thad tells about," laughed Frank.

"I guess not. If I thought so, we would leave you right here on the island," said Thad.

After picking up the two grouse, they made a circuit to the place where they started the first bevy, routing out three more large bunches on the way.

Pausing in a little glade, the game was counted—twenty-eight quail and two grouse.

“That is all we can use now, let’s stop,” said Thad.

“Say, boys, we wanted some grapes and there they are,” said Dick, pointing to a low tree a few yards distant festooned with grape-vines loaded down with purple fruit.

In two minutes everybody was eating grapes with a keen relish.

“Gee! but these are the biggest and sweetest wild grapes I ever tasted; almost as big and sweet as Concords,” remarked Dick, his mouth taking in fruit with the rapidity of a cider mill.

After all had eaten their fill, Tom said:

“What’s the matter with taking a pailful of these along, they are so fine?”

“Good idea. Dick, take the game down to the boat and bring a pail or two,” said Thad.

Dick, nothing loath, picked up the birds and started for the bank. The other boys were talking and pulling down more grapes, when they were startled by a yell that would have been the envy of a Comanche Indian.

“Good heavens! What’s the matter with Dick?” cried Thad in alarm, darting out from under the grape-vine and looking anxiously toward the bank. There stood Dick on the bank forty yards away frantically waving his arms and yelling:

“Come here quicker than chain lightning, boys.”

"Something is up," said Tom, as they dashed for the bank at the top of their speed.

"What is it, Dick?" asked Thad, as they came running up.

For an answer Dick pointed down the river.

Two hundred yards below and near the foot of the island, the Greased Lightning and both skiffs were peacefully floating down the Mississippi twenty-five yards from shore, utterly oblivious to the fact that no pilot was aboard. The boys took in the situation at a glance. In their haste and eagerness to shoot quail, no one had thought to tie the boat; and the action of the current had gradually loosened and carried it out in the river. Thad was prompt to make up his mind and act. "Quick, boys, grab the guns and birds and come on."

The sprint those four boys made down the glistening, sandy beach that beautiful October afternoon in pursuit of the truant Greased Lightning was something remarkable. Sheridan's renowned twenty-mile canter to Winchester, and Paul Revere's historic midnight gallop, pales into insignificance compared with it; for they realized if the boat once drifted beyond the foot of the island out into the broad river, it was beyond their reach.

Had the time been midsummer, both Thad and Tom would have hailed a mile swim with delight, especially down stream, but at the present temperature of the water such a thing was not to

be thought of. Dick's short legs failed to keep up with the procession and when he arrived even with the truant houseboat, Tom was undressed ready for a swim in the chilly water.

"Look out for cramps," called Thad, as Tom waded out to his waist before throwing himself in the water for a swim.

"I ain't afraid," Tom replied, making a plunge and striking out boldly for the boat.

Anxiously and with beating hearts the boys watched their comrade breast the cold water after his sharp run, and when he climbed aboard a cheer went up that shook the rocky bluffs.

Quickly untieing the large skiff, Tom let the Greased Lightning float on and with a few strokes was back to his companions, where he was welcomed with the liveliest evidences of delight.

"Get into your clothes quick, Tom, before you catch cold," said Thad, as they placed the guns and game in the skiff.

"I ain't cold," replied Tom, his chattering teeth belying his words.

"You're not suffering much with heat in this air, just the same," said Thad, taking the oars while Tom struggled to get his shirt over his dripping hide.

Five minutes later they were on board, the skiff tied, and Tom dressed.

"How do you feel, Tommy old girl, after your swim?" asked Thad, his eyes shining with

joy and relief to think how easily they had gotten out of a scrape that might have proved very disagreeable if not disastrous.

"Finer'n a fiddle," and Tom executed a few steps of "Wilson's Clog," winding up with the remark: "I feel as though I could lick anybody in four counties."

"Here is a gentleman on whom, although he isn't in four counties, I should be pleased to have you work off your surplus energy and skill," said Dick, pushing Frank toward Tom.

"Excuse me. Your man is too light; outside of my class entirely, I am happy to say," and Tom bowed to the youthful promoter of pugilism with mock gravity.

"I don't doubt you are happy over it," replied Dick with a grin.

"Well, boys, now we are on board I don't think we had better bother about those grapes," said Thad.

"No, I'm tickled enough to get the boat again; let the grapes go," replied Tom.

"Boys, let this be a warning to us. When we land after this, let each man resolve himself into a committee of one to see that the boat is securely fastened. We don't want any more such experiences if we can avoid it. Who is to blame for this scrape? Don't all speak at once," and Thad looked around sternly.

Dick was the last man ashore and everybody looked at him accusingly. He took the hint and said with a comical sigh of resignation:

“Being the last man off the boat, I suppose little Dicky Kingston will have to shoulder the responsibility. He comes in handy as a scapegoat for the rest of you big lubbers.”

“We forgive you this time but don’t let it occur again. Please remember we are not children playing in the back yard with a washtub for a lake,” the Commodore remarked, as he set his gun in a convenient place.

“It’s a wonder you wouldn’t do a little remembering on your own hook,” Dick retorted.

“Avast there. Don’t talk back to the Commodore.”

“This is getting pretty confounded thin. I have to cook, wash the dishes, kill the ducks, and see to tying up the boat. After a bit, you fellows will want me to bring your meals to you in bed,” and Dick retired victorious to the cabin, followed by the cheers of the crew.

“I’ll help you wash the dishes, Dick, then we will all pick the game out on deck,” said Frank, following Dick into the cabin.

CHAPTER IX.

TOM MAKES A LUCKY SHOT.

After Dick and Frank had washed the dishes, the boys all drew their chairs out on deck and proceeded to pick and clean the quail and grouse. Over running water is a very convenient place to clean game. The feathers are thrown to the four winds of heaven, and there are oceans of water to cleanse it with. Of course, if there happens to be a breeze in the wrong direction, one may get a mouthful of feathers occasionally, but that is part of the fun.

The day being quiet, however, the boys were not bothered that way. The feathers were thrown broadcast on the bosom of the river, leaving a trail that resembled a huge fleet of tiny canoes floating and dancing idly down the current. As they worked they chattered away of their hits and misses and the recent mishap, while the Greased Lightning floated along down

the quiet river, the boys occasionally suspending operations to take a turn at the sweeps in order to keep her in the current.

It was one of those lovely, peaceful fall afternoons when the cool, pure air charged with the delicious odors of the forest and river makes the mere fact of living and breathing out in the woods a delight. Over the brown, seamed, rocky bluffs, capped with the gorgeous autumn foliage, the long-winged hawk wheeled lazily, sweeping anon in ever widening circles, evidently deeply interested in some business of its own. On some dead branch along the sandy shore, the crested kingfisher composedly sat, alert and watchful. Suddenly he drops to the water as though shot; struggles a moment, springs in the air again, and with a guttural cry that rings far over the water, skims along the smooth river a hundred yards, then with a graceful upward curve alights on another dead branch and relapses into silence.

Sometimes when drifting along gazing idly over the smooth water, the young voyagers would be astonished to behold a big fish perhaps two or three feet in length suddenly leap high in the air as though reconnoitering for some purpose, and a second later disappear from view like a ghostly visitant from another world. To Thad, Dick, and Tom, brought up on the banks of the wide river, these sudden leaps excited only a passing interest, as they had seen them hun-

dreds of times, but to Frank they were a never ending source of interest and curiosity.

"Why do the fish do that?" he inquired after a huge shovel-fish had exhibited itself a second or two and dropped back into its native element.

"Ask us something easy," Thad replied. "Perhaps it is to get a mouthful of fresh air."

"Maybe it is a scout the rest of the fish send up to see if a seine is being drawn around them," said Dick.

"One thing I've noticed, it's nearly always big fish that jump," remarked Tom.

"Maybe it's a dare to show us they aren't afraid," suggested Dick.

"We've had great luck missing sandbars, so far," observed Tom.

"Yes, we can thank our lucky stars we have a good stage of water," Thad replied.

"I'm not sorry; I haven't lost any sandbars," said Dick.

"Don't crow too soon. You may find some yet. The water may drop two feet before we get home," remarked Tom.

"That's so," said Thad. "It all depends on the rains north of us."

All the rest of the day the boys floated with the current. There being no head winds they made good time. It was getting toward the end of the rafting season and some of the boats were laid up for the winter, but every few hours a steamboat passed them, pushing a huge raft

of logs or sawed lumber down to the mills and lumber yards below.

Sometimes these rafts caught them unawares by appearing suddenly around a bend in a narrow channel, when the boys were loafing on the south side of the boat shooting turtles or some other equally interesting game. A sharp warning whistle from the steamboat, and the boys did some hard work, hustling lively at the sweeps for a few minutes, sliding the Greased Lightning across the channel out of the way, for the heavy rafts pushed by the powerful stern-wheel boat made much better time than the light houseboat. In a few moments the steamboat would glide slowly by, puffing like a heavily loaded team up a long hill. Then the boys would slide back into the channel again to catch the full force of the current.

Again they would meet a raftboat that had been down and delivered its raft and was returning like an empty wagon for another load. These came clipping along at a lively gait. Some of them were particularly noted for speed and turned a "nasty wheel," the swells of which made the Greased Lightning dance about like a chip on a pond. At intervals during their trip, a long, gaudy packet of the "Diamond Jo" line, glittering with white paint and loaded with freight and passengers, passed up or down.

Sometimes they would be near enough a town to hear the long, deep, mellow whistle—two long

and two short—of the packet, warning the town of its approach and to get ready with their freight and passengers. Occasionally they passed a dirty-looking houseboat tied to the bank, guarded by half a dozen ragged urchins and a slovenly-looking woman. If the head of the family happened to be asleep instead of hunting or fishing, the guard detachment was augmented by a mangy mongrel cur or two. The proprietor of this menagerie was generally some biped who hated work and loved the river and the freedom of the woods and waters. And who can blame him for his choice in giving up the thrall and bondage of hard, ceaseless toil for a pittance, when he could catch in one day enough catfish to feed his retainers a week, and have his valuable time to himself to hunt coons and beech-trees, and loaf in the shade and sleep? This kind of people is never without a coopful of children to cheer the lonely hours, and eat catfish on the side. Civilization and politics are unknown quantities, and towns are of little use except as a place to purchase a few groceries and a liberal supply of tobacco, whiskey, and quinine.

Just before sunset, the bluffs dropped away from the river and the boys saw by the appearance of the deep woods that the chances were good for lakes, sloughs, and consequently hunting, fishing, and trapping for a few days.

Half a mile down the forest a small bay put in

from the river, and the Greased Lightning was worked over along shore and run in. It proved a snug little harbor, as it ran around a wooded point which sheltered them alike from winds and the observation of craft passing up or down the river. A fine, sandy beach a few feet in width dropped away from the trees, and in this little pocket the Greased Lightning soon rested.

Just as they landed a deep, guttural "Whoo-whoo-who-o-ah" came out of the forest, and Dick cried out:

"This is 'Owl Bay.' "

"All right, that's a good name; but just hurry up supper, I'm hungry," replied Tom, as he sprang ashore with a line.

"Hear that fellow, will you? and then claim I am the only man that eats anything," and Dick disappeared in the cabin while the other boys made the boat doubly secure, after their recent mishap.

The deep, quiet peace of a perfect fall evening, far from the haunts of man, was over the world as the quartet of hungry young hunters sat down to a substantial supper of fried quail, fried fish, mealy baked potatoes, bread and butter, delicious coffee, doughnuts, cake, and cheese.

The crimson trail following the sun was slowly growing fainter and a solemn hush brooded over river and forest. For a few moments the silence was dense enough to cut with a knife, then the deep, far-reaching voice of an owl

broke out, addressing the convention on some subject of importance in owl politics. It was followed instantly by another from a distant part of the wood and that one by still another. The first speaker then moved the previous question, and in ten seconds half a dozen were talking at once in a frantic endeavor to get the attention of the presiding officer.

"Who-who-who-o-ah. Who-who-a-ah." Another one responded: "Wah-wah-who-ah." Another deep-voiced member that the boys imagined to have a long gray beard and a wise, venerable appearance, responded gravely: "Who-ah," in a tone evidently intended to convey a great deal of wisdom.

"Those blamed critters make more racket than a lot of women at a rag bee," remarked Dick, sticking his fork in another big, mealy *Pomme de terre*.

"Maybe it is a national convention to nominate a president," suggested Frank.

As the meal progressed, the racket out in the woods increased until Dick arose and stepping to the door sang out:

"Say, if you folks don't make less racket we'll call the police."

"That will fix 'em, I guess," said Thad, as Dick resumed his seat to finish his supper.

Apparently it did; silence instantly reigned in the woods. Only for a few moments, however, and then a single inquiring "Who-ah" was

heard far off and in a few minutes the convention was at it again hammer and tongs.

When the noise was at its height, there came through the forest a long-drawn, unearthly scream that rose to a shriek. Hushed was the voice of every owl, and the four boys dropped their forks and stared hard at each other with paling faces.

Tom was first to speak. He said in a low, awestruck voice:

“Boys, that’s a panther sure, and no mistake. I never heard one before, but old man Larsen has described their cry to me lots of times, and that’s it to a dot. Ugh! it makes a fellow shiver, doesn’t it?” As he spoke, that blood-chilling scream came ringing through the woods again.

Thad arose to his feet quietly, remarking:

“I don’t suppose there is any danger of the animal attacking four of us, but just the same it won’t cost anything to have a gun or two ready.”

“Get the 45,” said Tom.

“Not for me. If I have to face a beast like that at close range, I would sooner depend on my old double-barreled shotgun than all the rifles in the country,” Thad replied.

“Why?” Frank asked.

“Because, as an old hunter explained to me once, a rifle ball will just make a small hole through the animal, and while it may kill him in the end, he may have strength enough left to

throw himself on you and kill you first, while a shotgun at a few feet will tear the whole head off of him, or blow a hole in his body that will knock the fight out of him at once."

"That sounds sensible, but I'll get the rifle, too," said Tom.

"Boys, look at Bruno!"

It was Frank who spoke. The dog had evidently heard the terrible cry, for every hair on his back stood erect like quills, while his usually kindly brown eyes shone with a greenish, phosphorescent glare not pleasant to look upon. He lay in his accustomed place, but made no effort to arise and get outdoors.

"That is the first time I ever saw Bruno act afraid of anything; it's something big and ugly," said Dick.

"It's a panther all right; I'd bet my boots on it," said Tom confidently.

"It is probably out hunting its supper and yells to let everything know it is around and boss of the roost. If a lion should come along and let out a roar to show *he* was boss, Mr. Panther would climb a tree and crawl in a hole. There is nothing like knowing he is head guy to give a fellow confidence in himself," remarked Thad, who had slipped a couple of shells in his gun and set it where it was convenient.

"This is a pleasant introduction to our new camping place," said Dick.

"Yes. Can't say that I like it either," Tom replied.

"Well, we don't have to stay here unless we want to," Frank observed.

"No, that's so," Thad replied, "but we are not going to be scared out by the yell of a panther, before we have fairly landed. We will look around to-morrow and see what things look like, anyhow; panthers are not likely to attack people in the day time."

"I notice the gentleman broke up that owl convention pretty effectually; haven't heard a peep out of them since he began to sing," Dick remarked with a grin.

Silence reigned in the forest while the boys cleared away the remains of their feast and washed the dishes, talking in low, subdued tones. When Dick opened the door to throw out the dish water, he did not remain outside any longer than was necessary, but in that brief instant Bruno's growl became more ominous and the bristles stood straighter on his back.

"Boys," said Tom, "that critter ain't far off. It may be making a sneak on us for all we know."

"Possibly the smell of the food draws him around," suggested Frank.

"Tom," said Thad, "I'll challenge you to take our guns outside, shut the door, and watch for the varmint, maybe we can see his eyes; are you afraid to?"

"Not much," returned Tom boldly. "In the language of the boatman at Loch Gile: 'I'll go,

my chief; I'm ready.' If four men and a cart-load of guns, to say nothing of a dog, can't whip a panther, we better go home and crawl under the bed."

"You may be a little more ready to get back in the cabin," said Dick.

"You take your shotgun and I'll take the rifle, and turn down the light in the cabin, boys," said Tom without heeding Dick's interruption.

"All right, come on," and the two boys stepped quickly out in the darkness and closed the door.

Everything was quiet out in the black, forbidding forest except the soft rustling of the leaves in the faint night breeze, and the occasional chirp of an insect. Thad and Tom stood for five minutes like statues, straining their eyes and ears without hearing any unusual sound.

Then Tom quietly clutched Thad's arm.

"Sh! Do you see those two little greenish, fiery spots up in that tree across the bay? That is some animal's eyes; I can see them blink."

"I see them," whispered Thad. "Shall we shoot?"

"Yes, let me try it with the rifle. You stand a better show of hitting it with the shotgun, but it's about forty yards and a shotgun at that range wouldn't hurt anything with small shot. It's a hundred to one chance, but if I hit anything it will count."

"All right. I'll stand ready with the shotgun."

Tom slowly raised the rifle to his face, and by the dim light of the stars pointed it as nearly as possible toward the two phosphorescent, glaring points of fire. When he felt his aim was fairly correct, he pressed the trigger; the report of the big rifle roared out in the stillness of the night like a twelve pounder.

Instantly this was followed by a wild scream that sent Thad's and Tom's hair on a journey to the moon, as far as the roots would allow. There was a crashing and breaking of branches and a heavy body struck the ground across the little bay, and then Thad and Tom discreetly stepped inside and shut the door with amazing celerity.

Frank and Dick sitting in the semi-darkness heard the report and that horrible scream.

"For Lord's sake, Tom, it was after us; did you hit it?" cried Dick, in whose round, ruddy face the blood was slowly coming back.

"I hit something, from the racket over in the woods," replied Tom grimly, peering out of the window across the bay.

"That was the luckiest scratch shot ever made on the face of the globe. You must have hit that critter or he wouldn't have dropped off the limb," said Thad, sitting down but with the gun still held ready for business.

"No, I couldn't do it again in a hundred years steady shooting," Tom replied. "Maybe we can find out from the blood in the morning how hard I hit him."

“Then you won’t investigate any more to-night?” Dick said, the shivers going out of his spine now that the lights were up and the boys in the cabin, and his old propensity to jolly coming back.

“No, thank you, we’ll wait till daylight.”

And they did. When they retired, everybody loaded his gun and placed it convenient, but it was hours before anybody went to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST.

The hour was so late ere the boys fell asleep that it was long after sunrise when they awoke.

As the events of the previous evening flashed upon them, there was a lively scrambling to dress and ascertain the results of Tom's shot in the darkness.

"Did we shoot a panther last night or did I dream we did?" asked Dick with a capacious yawn, as he began to dress.

"*We* shoot a panther," echoed Tom, with marked emphasis on the "*we*," as he hurried into his clothes; "no, my son, it was a dream so far as you are concerned."

"Dick reminds me of a story papa used to tell about a boy," remarked Thad. "A Northern family moved to Missouri where the possums were numerous, and one day the men folks went away, leaving the mother with half a dozen small children to run things. During the day a

possum was discovered trying to abduct a chicken, and a club being thrown at it, the animal immediately rolled up in a ball and apparently died right there. The woman had heard of "playing possum," and by dint of hard coaxing the eldest boy was nerved up to taking the ax and chopping the astonished animal's head off. At the opening of hostilities, the boy I speak of, promptly ran into the house and crawled under the bed. When the men folks returned that evening, the children ran to tell of the exploit and the boy who had crawled under the bed headed the procession, yelling at the top of his voice:

"Father, father, we killed a possum!"

"That's Dick to a dot," grinned Tom.

"Is that so," and Dick's nasal promontory went up in the air; "you ease up or I'll let you get your own breakfast."

"All right, I'll be good," and Tom went out to wash the sleep from his eyes.

"Tom, while Dick is getting breakfast, let's you and me take the guns and walk around to where we heard that thump last night; maybe we can track the animal by the blood."

"Just what I was going to propose," said Tom, picking up the rifle. "Want to go along, Bruno?"

Thad stopped and gave the dog a pat as he opened the door. The green glare had gone out of Bruno's eyes but the hair on his back did not

lie naturally, as he arose and followed Thad and Tom. A short walk took them around the bay or pocket, and with guns ready they carefully approached the spot where Tom had fired at the gleaming eyes.

The boys were within fifteen feet of the tree when Thad stopped and pointed ahead.

"Tom, I'll be jiggered if you didn't kill him; look there."

Sure enough, on the ground stretched out stiff and cold, lay the long, tawny form of a panther. Bruno at their heels growled and his bristles arose. He walked around the great beast, growling under his breath, sniffed gingerly at the body, then walked away, his eyes glowing with fear and hate. The bullet from the big 45 had entered the left eye and passed through the head, coming out at the shoulder.

Thad seized the panther by the leg and dragged it along the bank to where there was a break in the bushes and in full view of the Greased Lightning. Then he shouted. Dick and Frank came to the door and when they saw what the boys had on the opposite bank, Dick ejaculated in amazement:

"Well, I'll be teetotally gosh blamed if that lucky fool of a Tom didn't actually kill a panther in the dark."

"Frank, bring over a skiff," Thad called.

In two minutes Frank was across the little bay, the panther was dumped in the skiff and

shortly after laid out on the deck of the Greased Lightning, where the four boys gathered around and gazed in open-mouthed wonder at the huge cat's muscular proportions.

"Dick," said Thad sternly, "after seeing the result of Tom's shot, if you ever hint about that woodcock shot again I'll disown you."

Dick held up his left hand and said meekly:

"If I ever do, may my left hand forget its cunning in cooking rice."

Tom gave him a gentle poke in the ribs. "Eh, Dick, is that you?"

Dick gave him a queer look that gradually merged into a good-natured grin, and disappeared in the cabin.

After a breakfast of quail on toast, soft boiled eggs, and coffee, the boys set to work and skinned the panther, stretching its hide on the side of the Greased Lightning. Then they held a consultation. Frank had a pet corn on his toe and desired very much to macerate it in hot water and amputate the little pest. So it was decided that Thad and Dick should take their guns and investigate the chances for trapping near by, while Tom and Frank remained at the houseboat.

"I'll just take the 45 this trip," Thad remarked.

"Keep your eye peeled for this gentleman's mate," said Tom with a nod toward the fresh pelt, as Thad and Dick picked up their guns ready to start.

"Sure we will. I don't want a critter like that chewing the back of my neck," replied Dick.

"I don't know but we had better put a sandwich or two in our pockets. I don't expect to be gone long, but we can't tell what might happen," said Thad.

"Hokey pokey, yes, I forgot a lunch," and Dick set down his gun and proceeded to wrap up a lunch that Tom declared was enough for a dozen farmers, but which the former insisted was barely sufficient to ward off starvation for a few hours.

"Where shall we strike for?" Dick asked, as they started out through the forest.

"That depends upon the lakes, sloughs, and creeks we run into. We may find some we can't wade before we go a quarter of a mile."

A short walk brought them to a small lake nestling in the woods, the surface of which was well sprinkled with mallards and teal, that arose with noisy quacks and a great fluttering of wings at the appearance of the boys on the bank. Numerous muskrat runs perforated the banks, and the tracks of various animals were visible in the soft mud. On walking around the lake, Thad and Dick discovered human footprints also.

"Somebody has been trapping here ahead of us," said Thad, pointing to the tracks.

They encountered several small lakes and

creeks, but waded or walked around them. Along the shores of most of these little sheets of water were the same footprints observed at the first lake.

"Some trapper has been here and skimmed off the cream," remarked Thad.

"Yes," Dick replied, "it looks as though we might as well pull up stakes and go on."

Many of the trees were very large, showing that the timber had not been cut for years, if ever. After tramping about for a couple of hours, Dick's short legs grew weary and they sat down to rest upon a mossy log that lay on a little ridge.

"Jocks, but that's hard work," Dick remarked with a sigh of relief, as he deposited his weary frame upon the log with the graceful, heartfelt abandon with which a mud-hen alights in a pond. "The next time," he continued, "that I read about some hunter or scout starting off on a lope through the woods and keeping it up for hours without rest, food, or drink, I'll know that author is a big liar."

"Either that or they had different kinds of legs from ordinary people. I'm tired as a dog," replied Thad.

After resting a few moments the boys felt better, and began to peer about and take in their surroundings. The log upon which they sat was partially concealed by trees and brush, with here and there an open glade that gave them a view

out in the forest beyond. Dick took a mental inventory of everything out in front, and then wheeled around on the log to take in the rear view. In a moment Thad heard him utter an ejaculation of surprise.

“What do you see?”

Dick pointed out in the forest. “There’s our trapper.”

Thad looked in the direction indicated and saw a man sitting beneath a tree, busily engaged in some occupation. His back was toward the boys but even at that distance, sixty yards, they could see that his hair was white with age.

“He is an old timer from the looks of him,” remarked Thad. “Let’s go over and scrape an acquaintance.”

“All right,” assented Dick, always ready for anything.

They had not taken three steps, when Dick clutched Thad’s arm in no gentle grip, and whispered shrilly:

“For heaven’s sake, Thad, what’s that just this side of him?”

A glance told Thad what it was.

“It’s a panther, sure as the world, and it’s after that man,” he cried, unconsciously gripping the big rifle tighter, and raising it to his shoulder.

Creeping along with the noiseless movement of its kind, its eyes fixed intently upon its victim, the huge cat approached its prey. The long

tail waved gracefully to and fro as the beast went forward noiselessly as a falling leaf.

"Don't shoot; you may kill the man," whispered Dick excitedly.

As the panther was in a direct line with the stranger, Thad at once saw the wisdom of Dick's advice, and lowered the gun.

"We've got to do something mighty sudden, or the panther will kill him," he cried, hardly less excited than Dick.

"Maybe we can scare it by yelling," suggested Dick.

Before the advice could be acted upon, the beast took two or three quick steps and crouched low to the ground; its tail gave two or three sudden jerks in a second's time, and the big cat shot up in the air as though from a gun.

With a sickening sense of horror, Dick saw the tawny form of the panther come down upon the back of its victim, and he could almost hear the terrible teeth crunch into the flesh.

"Come on quick, or we will be too late," cried Thad, starting swiftly toward the scene of conflict.

Dick saw the gleam of a knife in the man's hand, as he stabbed blindly at the panther; then both were rolling and squirming on the ground in deadly conflict. He waited to see no more but dashed after Thad.

The latter ran up to within twenty yards of the combatants, and then paused a moment to

steady his nerves after the sharp run before attempting to send a bullet into the animal's body. It was no easy task, for man and beast were struggling and shifting about so there was great danger of hitting the former.

Thad quickly saw there was no use in trying to get a shot at the beast's head, for it kept close to the man's throat, which was covered with blood, serving to increase the panther's fury. Taking advantage of an instant when the animal's hips were high above its victim, Thad raised the rifle, and quick as a flash sent a 45 ball through the hindlegs.

It was only a snap shot, and could not hope to be fatal, but it served the purpose for which it was intended by the quick-witted boy. The beast felt the pain as the big bullet tore through its body, and with a snarl of rage, snapped at the wound.

That was what Thad wanted. With lightning-like swiftness, he threw in another shell and sent a ball crashing through the great round head. There was a convulsive quiver as the lead did its paralyzing work, then the panther rolled over on the ground and began to kick and claw the crimson leaves in the agonies of death.

Thad sent another ball through the animal's spine to make sure work, and then both boys ran up to see how badly the man was injured. He presented a terrible sight. Blood streamed from a dozen wounds where the cruel teeth and

claws had torn the flesh, and the white hair and clothing of the stranger were soaked with the crimson life current. It was more blood than Dick had ever seen before, and the sight half nauseated him.

“Are you badly hurt?” Thad inquired sympathetically, as he knelt beside the prostrate form.

A pair of deep-set, black eyes flashed a hunted look at Thad, but the open, manly countenance of the boy evidently reassured him, for the look softened and the stranger said faintly:

“I’m done for. I was going with consumption, anyhow, and this beast has just helped it along, thank God.”

Thad was shocked to hear these reckless words, but hastened to say:

“Cheer up. Perhaps it is not so bad. I will bind up your wounds and stop the loss of blood, and then we will carry you to the cabin,” and he hurriedly began to tear his handkerchief into strips.

“It’s no use, boys. I feel that I have not long for this world and I would sooner die here under the old forest trees. You may bind up my wounds, for it will keep the strength in me a little longer, and I want to tell you a story. I must talk to somebody before I die. Tear the lining from my coat if you want more bandages. This isn’t the first panther I’ve fought, but I was a younger man than I am now.”

As he bound up the old man's wounds, Thad could not help noticing how thin and wan he looked, while the loss of blood gave his face a corpse-like pallor that made Dick shiver. But what fascinated Thad most was the almost unnatural brightness of the dark, deep-set eyes that followed his every move.

After the boy had finished his self-imposed task the best he could, the man asked in a low, even tone that showed he was saving his strength, "Who are you and where do you live?"

In a few words Thad told him their name, where they lived, and why they were there. The man looked interested, and said: "You live near the place. Listen, boys. I was in the last stages of consumption before that beast tackled me. I am so weak now that I feel another hemorrhage will end it all. Ah, to be a happy boy again, freed from this load of sin." His eyes closed a moment and the white lips murmured faintly: "O Father, is there any room in heaven for a poor, lost sheep?"

He rambled on to himself, and the boys could hear the disjointed words of the Lord's prayer. Then the sunken eyes opened, and he said:

"Listen, boys: Years ago, in the state of Kentucky, I had a loving wife and a fine, manly boy almost the size of that little fellow," pointing to Dick; "but the boy died and my wife soon followed." He choked back a sob, then added,

“Then I took to drink and went to the devil. I joined a band of outlaws and horse thieves in the Northwest, and for years my hand was against every honest man. We stole horses, money, niggers, jewelry, anything we could turn into money, and when necessary or under the influence of liquor, we killed as well as robbed. How large the band was I never knew, as it was scattered all over the Northwest. I finally drifted in with part of the band at Bellevue, Iowa, and for years we did as we pleased, robbing and killing around over the country.

“Seven of us formed a private band inside of the main gang, and when we secured money or jewelry to any amount, hid it in a cave that was unknown to the rest of the outlaws. The cave had an opening out on the river, and ran back through the bluff with a rear entrance in a deep, heavily-wooded ravine. Two of our partners were expert masons and they made a cement or plaster as near the color of the outside rock as possible and walled up the front entrance, then we used the rear entrance and felt secure. Many a drunken carousal we held in that cave in the Mississippi bluffs after a rich haul.”

Thad glanced at Dick. The look was unnoticed by the man, who continued:

“The captain of our seven was a young fellow who went by the name of ‘Captain Jones,’ but he told me once when we were alone and he had been drinking heavily that his name was

Louis Armyn.”—Again Thad looked at Dick.—“Whether that was his real name or not, I never knew. He told me he had been sentenced to a ten-year term for safe-robbing in the East, but had escaped after serving a few months. He was a nervy, handsome fellow and went in the best society in many cities and towns around over the country, where he passed for a man of wealth and leisure, but he never lost an opportunity to rob a bank or steal diamonds. He was a diamond expert and could tell the difference between the genuine and a paste imitation at a glance. He was a crank on that one gem and had stolen thousands of dollars worth. He kept them in the cave, but I was the only one in the band who knew of their existence. The captain trusted me implicitly, and when we were alone in the cave would get out the jewels and admire and gloat over them. He seemed to love them as a miser does gold.

“There was a large room in the front of the cave that opened out of the entrance we had sealed up, and a passageway led through the bluffs to another larger room near the rear entrance. In this latter room we fixed up a stone table, and there we did our drinking and carousing. One day we were carousing and drinking as usual, when the captain became angered at one of the men and attempted to shoot him, but the man was too quick for him and shot the captain dead before he could draw his revolver.

“We carried the body to the front room intending to bury it there, and then went back after another drink. Then some of the men proposed we divide the gold and separate, now that the captain was dead. An altercation ensued over the division of the money, which ended in a fight with revolvers and knives, and when it was over I was the only man left alive.” Dick gave Thad another meaning look and the latter nodded.

The old man paused and closed his eyes. He was plainly growing weaker and nothing but sheer will power kept him from a collapse. After a moment his eyes opened again and he continued:

“I had no wish to stay there any longer, so I quickly made up my mind to load the gold and diamonds in a skiff and float down the river to some town where I was not known, take a steamboat there for New Orleans, and then ship for England, there to pass the remainder of my days.

“But first, I could not resist the temptation to visit Bellevue and see some of the boys in the gang. So after keeping out a couple of hundred dollars, I buried the box of gold near the captain’s body. The diamonds I left buried under the edge of the wall in the south part of the room, where the captain kept them, so if somebody discovered one they might not the other. Then I went back to the other cavern for

some purpose; and being filled with liquor, forgot to go back and bury the captain's body. It is doubtless there to this day as I have never been to the cave since.

"Making my way to Bellevue, I was soon drinking and rioting with the others of the band who made that their headquarters. I was in no haste to return for my hidden wealth, for the wild, reckless life we led held a sort of fascination for me. So I stayed and stayed and it proved the worse for me, for the following spring, it was eighteen forty, the citizens became so indignant and desperate at our lawless acts that they resolved to drive us out at any cost.

"We barricaded ourselves in a hotel and a bloody fight followed, in which only six of us escaped. Three were killed outright and thirteen captured. I was among the latter and fully expected to be hanged, but the people instead gave us from four to thirty lashes on our bare backs and sent us adrift down the river in skiffs, with instructions never to return on penalty of hanging.*

"I was too sick and sore to get the money then, and made my way to St. Louis. Somehow, something always occurred to prevent my returning for the hidden wealth, and so time went on until the gold excitement broke out in California in forty-nine. Most of the band went out there to gamble and rob, for it was a fruitful field, and they persuaded me to accompany

*See history of the Bellevue war, Jackson Co., Iowa.

them. That was twenty-nine years ago, and since then I have drifted all over the West. Most of my companions have been shot or hanged, and I have more than once escaped the wrath of the vigilance committee by a hair.

“This summer I was in St. Paul, and being without money or friends, resolved to work my way down the river to the cave, get the money, and spend my few remaining days in peace and plenty. The ravages of consumption had already set in, but I hoped the outdoor life would benefit my health. I have trapped a little on the way, selling the furs at the next town to get something to eat, but here I caught cold and have grown rapidly worse, and now this panther has finished me. Ah, boys, let nothing ever tempt you to travel the path of vice. It is pleasant at first, but the end is woe—woe.”

The old man had exhausted his strength in talking and, before Thad could speak, went into a convulsion of coughing that ended in a violent hemorrhage. It was the first thing of the kind Dick had ever seen, and his eyes grew big with horror as the blood welled from the old man's mouth and nostrils.

The dying man motioned Thad to bend nearer. In a voice barely audible he whispered:

“I am dying. Here is a paper inside my shirt with a description of the bluff and location of the cave. Take it; the wealth is yours if you can find it. Bury me here. Avoid wickedness as you would a pestilence. Good-by.”

He sank back white and rigid as he thrust a folded paper into Thad's hand and his breathing apparently ceased.

The boys remained motionless for several moments, then Dick whispered in a voice full of awe: "He is dead."

As he spoke, there came from the bloody lips of the old man, in a low, sweet tone, the words: "We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,
For the old Kentucky home far away."

As the last words died away, there was a slight rattle in the throat; a convulsive quiver; and the old outlaw had passed to the other shore.

Tears filled Dick's eyes as he stood rooted to the spot, gazing down upon the pallid, bloody features of the dead stranger. His thoughts were recalled by Thad, who heaved a sigh and said:

"Well, it's all over, Dick. We had better carry him into the cabin and fasten the door so nothing can disturb him, and then go back and get the boys to come and help bury him and skin the panther; we have nothing to do it with."

Tenderly they lifted the body of the old man, outlaw though he had been, and bore it to the little cabin. A couple of old chairs, a pair of blankets, and a number of stretched and drying muskrat, coon, and mink skins showed that it

had been the old man's stopping place for a few days. After carefully depositing the body upon the floor and covering it with a blanket, they closed and fastened the door so that nothing would disturb the sacred dead in their short absence.

"What shall we do with this fur? Here are eight rats, two mink, and a coon," said Dick, as they walked back to the scene of the late conflict.

"Better leave everything, panther and all, just as it is, and go back after the boys," replied Thad.

"And don't forget to look out for more panthers." Dick was so nervously wrought up over seeing the second one, that he was constantly on the watch. Even while the old man was telling the story of his life, he had kept his eye out, half expecting to see another one crawling toward them.

As they walked through the forest, Dick said in a subdued voice: "Thad, I believe we've found that seventh man; what do you think?"

"It looks very much as if we had," was the quiet reply.

Presently Dick remarked again:

"If—if we should happen to find the diamonds, don't you think we ought to divide with the other boys?"

"Of course. They are our partners on this trip."

Dick heaved a sigh of relief and trudged on.

They were a pretty sober pair of boys. The old outlaw's story of his ill-spent, wicked life made a deep impression upon their boyish minds, so much so, in fact, that Thad had not even glanced at the paper, but thrust it in his pocket as though valueless.

Dick anxiously eyed every tree and clump of underbrush that they passed, on the lookout for panthers. Every rod or two he cast a fearful glance behind, and continually admonished Thad to keep the big rifle ready, while the shotgun on his own shoulder was carried at full cock. It is doubtful if Dick could have hit a barn at twenty yards in his present excited state, but as they neared the Mississippi and saw nothing more of the dreaded panthers, healthy, vigorous boyhood asserted itself and his nerves calmed down.

"Do you suppose that was the mate to the one Tom killed?" he inquired, for Dick could keep silent only about so long.

"I think so. Probably a pair of them strayed in here from the North. I don't suppose we will see any more."

"I hope not. I haven't lost any more. Ugh! I can see that critter making that bound now. I believe he could have gone over the top of a tree just as easy. I will probably see it in my dreams for a week," and Dick shivered.

"Well, it's no use scaring ourselves to death thinking about it. Here is the Mississippi, and yonder is the Greased Lightning."

It was close to the noon hour, and Tom and Frank were just putting dinner on the table as Thad and Dick walked into the cabin. The latter walked calmly up to the table and taking the untouched lunch from his pocket, unwrapped it impressively and laid it down without a word.

"For the love of Peter Ann! Dick brought back his lunch," gasped Tom in amazement. "Quick, Frank. Jump for the medicine case; paregoric, squills, turpentine, kerosene, anything; Dick is sick." Then he noticed the strange, subdued look in the faces of both. "What has happened to you two fellows? Meet another panther and have to run for it?"

"Just what we did," replied Dick grimly; "but let us have a bite to eat and we'll tell you about it. I am just beginning to get hungry. I haven't had time before."

"It can't be anything less than a murder or an earthquake, to take away your appetite," muttered Tom, as the boys seated themselves at the table.

After dinner, Thad gave Tom and Frank an account of their tramp and the tragedy they had witnessed. He modestly told of killing the panther, and repeated the outlaw's story excepting that part which related to the hidden wealth. That was reserved for a future surprise. He ended the story by saying:

"And now, boys, we must lock up the shanty and go and bury him, and skin the panther."

"No wonder Dick lost his appetite," remarked Tom in amazement, as the four shouldered their guns and a shovel and spade.

"Keep your eye out for panthers," admonished Frank, as they started through the woods.

"If a panther has nerve enough to tackle this outfit, he is welcome to the job," quoth Tom boldly.

Everything was quiet around the cabin when the boys arrived. Excepting a gray squirrel that scolded and barked in a neighboring tree, and the birds flitting here and there through the forest, nothing was seen. The panther still lay where its struggles had ended, and the blood and brains which oozed from the big hole in the head made by Thad's bullet, had clotted and grown cold. Upon opening the door, the boys saw at a glance that nothing had occurred to disturb the fast stiffening form.

A few yards from the cabin beneath a noble forest elm, the boys dug a grave in the sandy soil, and while Thad and Tom wrapped the body in a blanket and prepared it for burial, Frank and Dick gathered a great heap of crimson and yellow forest leaves and strewed them several inches deep over the bottom of the grave.

Upon a bed of mosaics soft as down, beneath the whispering trees, where the wild birds sang and flitted through the long summer days above the lonely, unmarked grave, the dead outlaw was laid to rest—"unwept, unhonored, and unsung."

Neither letter nor paper was found on the body that would give a clew to his name or friends. Evidently he desired to die unknown, and his identity remains a mystery to this day. Upon his person was found a big Colt's navy revolver, unloaded, which probably explained the reason for his not using it in the fight with the panther. The boys insisted on Thad's taking it as a keepsake to remind him of the fight, and he did so.

The short October day was well spent when the boys arrived at the Greased Lightning, carrying the skin of the panther and the other fur, and, needless to say, all were glad to get back. Tom remarked as he flung himself into a chair:

"I move we pass up this place and start down the river in the morning. This dead man and the panther somehow remind me of that gruesome old pirate song:

'Fifteen men on the dead man's chest—

Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum.

Drink and the devil had done for the rest—

Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum.'

What do the rest of you fellows think about it?"

"I second the motion. Imagine a fellow trying to trap and having a panther drop down on the back of his neck every four rounds. I don't call this a healthy locality," said Dick.

And Thad and Frank agreed.

CHAPTER XI.

TOM MAKES ANOTHER LUCKY SHOT.

"Say, boys, it's raining," called Tom next morning, as he awoke and heard the gentle pattering on the roof.

"Let her rain, we're here first," yawned Dick.

"If the current in the river hasn't quit business, we can float just the same. Come, cook, roll out and get breakfast," said Thad.

"Yes, that's it. I'm nothing but a galley slave," grumbled Dick, crawling into his clothes.

"What do we have for breakfast? I am getting worse than Dick," laughed Frank.

"Channel cat a la Greased Lightning; fried duck a la Dick, fried potatoes a la skillet, coffee, bread and butter, and pie," replied the cook.

"Pie! Who ever heard of pie for breakfast? What won't that fellow think of," said Tom in astonishment.

"Say, Tom, you learned at school that this globe is whirling around in space at the rate of

about a thousand miles an hour, didn't you?" asked Dick.

"I believe so; why? What of it?"

"Well, now will you please explain to me what difference it makes to a fellow, at what particular location in space he eats pie?" asked Dick.

"Get onto that logic will you, for an excuse to eat pie," grinned Thad.

"He is a pie philosopher," Tom remarked.

"Gee, boys. Here is a noble flock of ducks going down, just skipping the water," called Frank from the window.

"Bluebills," said Thad, looking over Frank's shoulder. "Wouldn't I like a smash into that bunch, though."

"You can't complain," said Tom; "you are the only one in the gang who has had a half way decent duck shoot this fall."

"Yes, that's so," replied Thad, "but that hunt would have been a great deal jollier if some of the gang had been along to talk it over with afterward."

"There goes another beautiful bunch. Cadwells this time," said Tom.

"How the dickens can you fellows recognize every kind of duck at a glance, so far away?" Frank asked.

"Can you recognize any of your schoolmates at a distance?" said Thad.

"Of course. Those I meet nearly every day. I can tell almost as far as I can see them."

“How do you do it?”

“Oh, by their walk and the way they swing their bodies, and general appearance,” Frank answered.

“That is just the way we tell ducks,” replied Thad. “Every species of duck has a flight peculiar to itself; the coloring of the feathers shows up differently on the wing, and as you say about boys, their general appearance differs.”

“How I love a quiet fall rain,” remarked Tom, looking contentedly out over the wide river.

“So do I,” replied Thad, “and there is another thing I love, that is a wild, cloudy, raw day when the ducks and geese are everywhere, and don’t know whether they are afoot or horse back.”

“Say, fellows, I have a proposition to submit to this menagerie,” said Dick, who was a wild-fowl crank of the first water, and who had been oscillating between the stove and the window overlooking the river ever since the boys had mentioned ducks.

“Exhale it,” said Tom, “and we’ll go into executive session.”

“Hadn’t we better go into breakfast first?” asked Frank demurely.

“Wise lad. You’ve got sense. I’m just aching to have a heart to heart talk with a couple of fried ducks,” responded Dick promptly.

"You will have a heart to heart talk with a stuffed club if you don't keep off my toes," remonstrated Tom, getting out from under Dick's pedal extremities.

"Get out of the workingman's way. If I must work and slave, I want room according to my strength," replied the cook laconically.

When the boys had partially satisfied their hunger, Dick's proposition was called for.

"It is this," said Dick, helping himself to another cup of coffee. "We haven't had a duck hunt this season. Now I propose that the first good ground we strike where the ducks are plenty, every man lay off a day or two and shoot ducks till he is satisfied."

"What shall we do with them?" inquired Tom.

"I was just coming to that. The first town we come to we will ship them to Chicago or St. Louis. That way, we all get a good shoot and the game isn't wasted."

Everybody seconded the motion at once, and it went through with a shout of glee. The fact was, the boys had been aching, smouldering, for a duck shoot, and Dick's scheme struck them right.

The ceaseless patter of the autumnal rain was still murmuring through the heavy forest with a dull, low, sleepy roar, when the boys, enveloped in rubber coats and boots, towed the Greased Lightning out in the current of the Mis-

issippi and started once more toward home. The moisture of the rain formed a thin, soft, gray mist that hung along the forest and over the wide river like a filmy veil, through which the wildfowl darted ever and anon on their long southern journey. Occasionally the confused clamor of a flock of geese was heard as they bore steadily along down the river high overhead, unmindful of the drizzling rain.

When the boat had fairly caught the current, the sweeps were fastened and then there was nothing to do but keep an eye out for sandbars, towheads, steamboats, snags, and so forth. Oh, yes, everybody kept his eye out for ducks and a favorable-looking spot to hunt them. That was part of the programme now.

They had floated along several hours and the boys were deep in a heated discussion over the merits of different guns, when suddenly there was a grinding, crunching sound, the speed of the Greased Lightning slackened, she heaved a sigh, and came to rest. The meeting at once adjourned *sine mora*, and everybody sprang outside in the rain well knowing what the trouble was.

“Here’s a go. High and dry on a bar, in two inches of water. A nice set of steamboatmen, you fellows,” growled the Commodore, surveying the plump sandbar upon which the Greased Lightning was idly rocking and being forced higher upon the yellow sand every moment by the strong action of the current.

“Whose fault was this; who was lookout?” he continued with lowering brow, turning to the crew.

“If I remember rightly, the lookout was trying to convince the rest of us that a Parker could give a Greener or Smith cards and spades,” replied Dick, winking at Tom.

“The lookout gets thirty lashes and goes without his supper. Get a hump on you, everybody, and don your rubber togs; every minute counts here. The current is stiff and is driving us harder on the sand every second.”

Enveloped in rubber coats and boots, the boys sprang on the bar in the shallow water and, placing their shoulders against the Greased Lightning, exerted all their strength to loosen her from the sand, but in vain. The unwieldy craft merely rocked and wobbled, and when they eased up, drifted a little higher on the bar.

“I like this first-rate,” remarked Tom, straightening up to get the kinks out of his back.

“Yes, this is juicy; especially in the rain. We’ll be in luck if we get home in time for our Christmas dinner,” replied Dick, as his eyes slowly went back into their sockets.

“Can’t we turn and put our backs to her and get a better pry?” asked Frank.

“Of course we can. We could shove ourselves down in the sand until only our heads stuck out of the water and we looked like four pegs in a row, but there’s no one here to pull us

out of the sand, and we would have to stay there and be bumping posts for the Greased Lightning to pound against," replied Dick gravely.

"It's no use, boys," said the Commodore, "we can't budge her. We'll have to rig up a Spanish windlass. Get the poles and rope, Tom."

"I would like first-rate to inquire what a Spanish windlass is, but after that break I made about the gaff I will keep my mouth shut," laughed Frank.

"Keep your eyes open and you will see in a minute," said Thad. "Set the ginny-pole Tom," he called.

In anticipation of just such a mishap, the boys had cut a number of stout poles and put them on board at their first camp, and they also carried plenty of rope. Dick fastened one end of the rope to a ring in the houseboat, while Tom set the ginny-pole and Thad stuck the upright in the sand close to the rope and adjusted the sweep by taking a half hitch around the rope next to the upright.

"Do you catch the idea now, Frank?" said Dick, as Thad took a twist around the upright.

"Yes, and it's a mighty powerful lever, too," said Frank, as the boat slowly came off the bar into deep water.

"We're afloat on the swift-rolling tide," yelled the Commodore joyfully.

"She lives, she moves, she seems to feel
The thrill of life along her keel!"
cried Frank.

“If you fellows don’t let up quoting poetry, you will have her on a sandbar again, and I wouldn’t blame her if she stayed there,” said Dick, as Tom cut the rope from the ginny-pole and they all climbed aboard and floated on.

“How would you like sandbars as a steady diet, Dick?” inquired Tom, as they went in out of the rain and took off their rubbers.

“Can’t say that I like them much, although I must confess I was badly stuck on this one,” replied Dick, looking at Tom without the quiver of a muscle.

“That wasn’t so bad either,” laughed Frank softly.

“It’s bad enough for a dose of the cat if we weren’t short of help,” retorted the Commodore grimly.

“Where did you fellows get onto that Spanish windlass?” inquired Frank.

“Oh, that is used every day by steamboatmen and raftsmen, where they need a powerful lever,” said the Commodore; “only when near enough the bank, they use a tree to snub around instead of a ginny-pole.”

“This is the clearing up shower; then I predict fair weather,” remarked Dick, as they watched the rain pour down in sheets.

“It can’t clear off any too soon to suit me,” said Tom.

“It is going to clear off quiet, and I am glad of it; I don’t want any cold, windy rain-storms

until we are camped near some good shooting grounds," said Thad.

Dick's weather predictions proved accurate, for in a short time the rain ceased and a cool breeze sprang up from the northwest. A blue rift appeared here and there in the drifting clouds. Soon a narrow band of blue appeared along the western horizon which grew wider steadily, until in a short space of time the gray blanket of clouds rolled down upon the many-tinted leaves and the peaceful river.

Shortly before sundown the Greased Lightning was passing a high bluff on the eastern shore. The bluff was faced by a seamed, irregular rocky wall that extended down almost to the water's edge. Thad was sweeping the river below with the glass, on the lookout for geese or sandbars. After satisfying his curiosity he turned and swept the rocky bluff to the east. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Boys, I see something!"

"What is it?" the others chorused.

"Some kind of an animal sunning itself on a little ledge of rocks. It looks like a wildcat. Take the glass, Tom. It is near the top, close to that fissure."

"I see it with the naked eye. It just moved a little," cried Dick.

Tom looked one brief instant and handed the glass back with suppressed excitement.

"It's a wildcat all right," with these words he disappeared in the cabin.

"You won't come within ten feet of him," said Dick, as Tom came out with the 45-70.

"I'll scare him anyhow."

"Raise the sights about four hundred yards and allow a little for the drift of the ball with the wind," said Thad quietly.

Quickly following the report of the rifle, the eager watchers saw the animal make a short side jump to the north and look around sharply. Apparently it did not connect the innocent-looking craft floating along far below with the spat of the ball against the rocks.

"Good shot, Tom. You lined him all right, but didn't allow quite enough for the wind. Try him again," said Thad.

Tom threw in another shell and raised the rifle. At the second report the animal made a leap in the air, and an instant later the astonished hunters saw it whirling and tumbling down the rocky wall.

"Well, wouldn't that kill you?" gasped Dick in amazement at this display of fancy shooting.

"It looks that way, at least it killed the wild-cat. Tom, I congratulate you on that shot," said Thad in honest admiration.

"So do I, Tom," said Frank. "That one shot was worth the trouble and expense of bringing the rifle along."

"I congratulate you, if you are dead positive it wasn't a scratch," said Dick doubtfully.

Tom laughed. "Of course not. It was just plain skill and long headed figuring."

"If it was, you have that rifle down pretty pat and the geese want to look out."

"Shall we go after him?" asked Frank.

"Of course," replied Thad. "Tom and I will jump into the skiff and run over after him. We will catch you before you go far."

Dick and Frank watched the boys land and walk up the sharp incline to the base of the rocks. Through the glass Dick saw Tom holding the rifle ready for a shot if the beast should not be dead. Then he saw Thad walk ahead and pick up a dark, dirty gray animal by the hindleg and knew Tom's bullet had done the business.

"Heave it aboard and let's see where you hit," said Dick, as Thad and Tom came alongside.

Tom tossed the cat on deck. Dick examined it critically. The big bullet had passed through the body breaking the backbone.

As Tom stepped on board, Dick held out his hand. "Shake, Tom. Do you know I had a sneaking idea all the time that you just scared the cat so it lost its balance, and the fall killed it; but I was off. You are champion of the 45-70. You get a wreath of mud-turtle claws soon as Frank and I kill turtles enough."

Tom's face lighted up with a pleased smile, for he knew any praise from Dick was earned.

"Bruno doesn't seem to like cats any better than panthers," remarked Frank, as the dog

came out and walked around the cat with his bristles up.

"No, he hasn't had any use for them since that wildcat jumped out of the cave at me," replied Thad.

A couple of miles farther down, the boys tied up for the night on the east shore of a wooded island. A pleasant evening was spent, a double game of chess played, and the boys retired.

The next morning Frank awoke and after rubbing the sleep from his eyes, shook his bedfellow. "Dick, roll out. You are cook yet."

After considerable effort he aroused Dick and the racket awoke Tom. But when the latter called Thad his place was found vacant.

"Hello. Thad has eloped." Just then the boom of a gun was heard.

"Thad is out after quail, I know, while we fellows are snoozing. I want some of that pie myself," and Tom was out of bed in a jiffy.

"I'll stay and help Dick get breakfast," said Frank, as Tom went out the door.

"Say, Frank," said Dick after Tom had gone. "I'll tell you what you might do. Take your rod and see if you can catch a mess of bass while I am getting breakfast. Only don't be gone more than half or three quarters of an hour."

"Thanks, awfully." And Frank seized his split bamboo and was off in a twinkling.

Dick fried the meat, poached the eggs, and

made the coffee, aggravated at frequent intervals by the report of Thad's and Tom's guns, but he was gradually learning the lesson of patience, and to perform his share of work cheerfully, so he complained not.

When breakfast was about ready, he went outside and exercised a vigorous pair of lungs with a call for breakfast that woke the echoes along the old Mississippi bluffs. Then he heard two reports, followed a moment later by an answer to his call; and soon after Thad and Tom accompanied by Bruno appeared on the bank and stepped aboard.

"Fifteen quail before breakfast. Gee, that's good," cried Dick, counting the pile of plump brown beauties the boys threw down.

"Where is Frank? Asleep yet I suppose," said Thad.

"Not much. Frank is out after 'redeyes,' and he ought to be back by this time. I told him not to stay long," replied Dick, as he went in to pour the coffee.

"Boys, I hear somebody yelling up at the north end of the island," said Tom, coming in the cabin.

"I wonder if that critter has fallen in the river again," said Dick, bending his ear to listen.

"There it is again; don't you hear it? Frank's voice, too," said Tom. "It don't sound as if he was in much trouble," he continued. "I'll

run up and see what he wants. No need of all of us going, I guess," and Tom started up the shore.

Thad and Dick waited patiently for ten minutes, and then they heard a series of yells and shouts.

"What the nation can be the matter? I'll run up and see," said Thad in great perplexity.

Then Dick waited until his patience was about exhausted. Finally he was regaled with a whole chorus of yells.

"Well, if that doesn't beat the Dutch. Soon as a fellow gets up there he begins to yell. Come on, Bruno. You and I will go up and straighten things out for those fellows. Wait a minute and I'll take the 45; they may need it."

Dick ran up the shore until near the head of the island, and then walked along, slowly peering around in the woods. Suddenly he heard Tom's voice, apparently up in the air, saying:

"Well, if there isn't that stub legged partner of ours and he has a gun, bless his ribs. He has more sense than the whole shooting match put together."

"Where are you fellows and why don't you come to breakfast?" Dick inquired, peering about.

"We are just aching to come to breakfast, but at present we are roosting in trees for our health," Thad called down from the leafy recess of a big hickory.

"Where you will be in a minute," Tom called from another tree, "if you don't have one of those heart to heart talks of yours with an old boar with tushes a foot long."

"Well, I'll be dished! Where is this ferocious beast?" said Dick with a grin.

"He is right under my tree, looking up very affectionately at me. Go easy and plug him before he gets a glimpse of you or you will be up a tree also. Don't let Bruno fight the old brute; his tushes will tear him to pieces," said Thad.

"Keep his attention attracted until I can get a bead on him," said Dick in a low tone.

"Don't lose your nerve, Dick, or we won't get any breakfast," called Tom.

"Never fear for my nerve, I'll fix him."

Thad climbed down a few feet and began to pelt the boar with hickory nuts. The grim old warrior put his front feet up on the trunk of the tree and looked up viciously at Thad, gnashing his teeth and champing his great foam-flecked jaws, as he tried to reach his tormentor.

Dick edged around until he obtained a fair view of the old fellow.

"Now let him come whenever he is ready. Hello, piggy, tackle somebody nearer your size; don't tree children," Dick shouted, throwing the rifle to his face.

The boar dropped to the ground and faced his new antagonist. He caught sight of Dick and Bruno and made a rush for them, his little

eyes twinkling with rage. Ere he had taken two steps Dick sent a bullet from the 45-70 crashing through his head, square between the eyes, and the belligerent brute dropped dead in his tracks.

"Any more of his gentry around?" inquired Dick coolly, as he threw another shell in the gun.

"I hope not, for goodness' sake. I am hungry," came from Frank over in another tree.

"Hello, Frank, are you alive? I thought maybe the old boar had made a meal of you. You are a nice fellow to send after fish," laughed Dick.

"I haven't a thing to say except I am glad I saved my fish-rod," replied Frank meekly, sliding down the tree to join his comrades.

"Had you caught any fish before the old fellow declared hostilities?" said Tom.

"Yes, I had four nice bass and was having more fun than a Dutch beer garden, when that old boar charged down on me. I knew I couldn't outrun him so I threw my rod up in some bushes and skedaddled for a tree."

Frank's rod and fish were found intact, and the four young hunters hurried to the boat with ravenous appetites.

After breakfast the Greased Lightning was again started on her way, the boys leisurely picking the quail and joking about their adventure as they floated along.

About ten o'clock they noticed a great number

of ducks pouring over the timber, and our young hunters knew there was some attraction for the wildfowl in that neighborhood. The boat was landed and Thad and Tom shouldered their guns and started through the woods to try and locate the birds. In about an hour they returned, looking jubilant.

“Boys, we have struck it just right,” cried Thad gleefully. “Just through the woods a little way are bottoms filled with rice lakes, besides several in the timber, and the ducks and geese are everywhere.”

“Where shall we keep the boat, on the river bank?” Dick asked, his eyes lighting up like a war horse sniffing the battle.

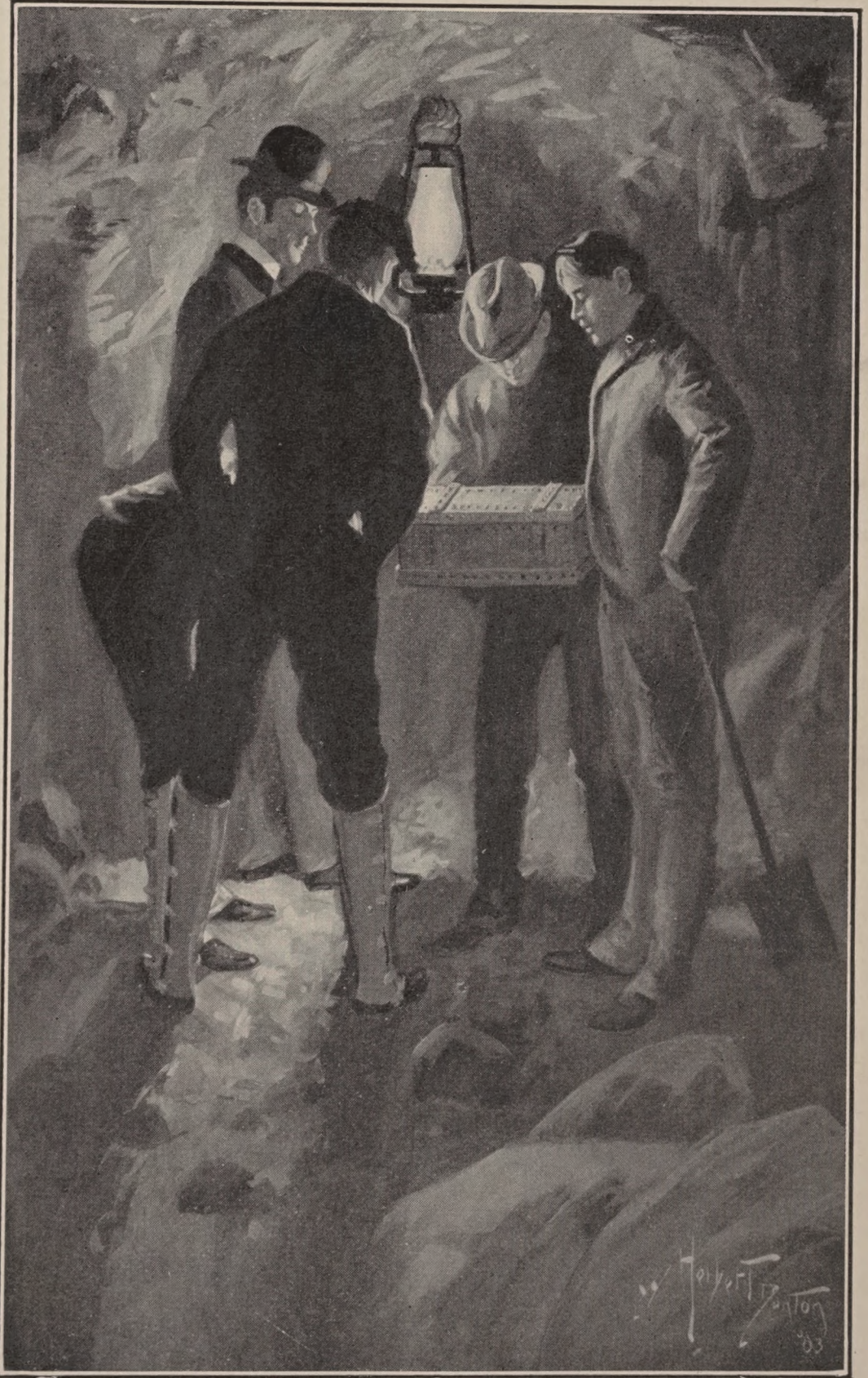
“No, there is a nice little pocket right around a point about eighty rods below here,” returned Thad, casting off the lines and springing aboard.

“Gee, won’t we smash ’em!” cried Dick, dancing a hornpipe to the edification of his mates. For a bigger duck crank never lived than Dick Kingston.

In due time the Greased Lightning rounded the point and was poled up in the little pocket secure from the wind and waves of the Mississippi. The boys then got everything ready to go immediately after dinner and pick out the best shooting points.

Right here let me call the attention of my young readers to that very thing. When hunt-

ing wildfowl on strange grounds, or even on familiar grounds if you haven't been shooting for some days, always make it a rule to look the ground over, find out where the ducks are centering and locate the main flyways before settling down to shoot. If you have a half day to put in, it will pay you to spend a third of the time if necessary in locating the best points.



"This box isn't nearly so heavy as the other was, Dick,"
Thad said

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CHAPTER XII.

DUCK SHOOTING.

After dinner there was a general powwow, and a donning of warm shooting clothes. Everybody of course was talking and laughing at once in happy anticipation. What sized shot to take and how many shells, must be discussed at some length. Thad and Dick preferred number 7 shot, Tom pinned his faith to 5's, while Frank, whose experience had been limited, took number 6's.

Bruno was the biggest and happiest toad in the puddle. He knew very well what was up, the sharp old scamp. He would walk up to Dick, sniff two or three times and look up at him, his eyes shining with a happy, eager light, wave his straight, handsome brush vigorously, then walk around and perform the same ceremony with the others. The enthusiasm of an intelligent hunting dog at such times is fully equal to his master's.

"Now, boys," said Thad, who took command as naturally as water runs down hill, "let's reconnoitre first, and locate the birds. We may not get much shooting this afternoon, but we will find out where to go, and be ready at daylight in the morning to do business."

"Shall we separate, each man for himself, or go in pairs?" asked Tom.

"Better go two together I guess, although it doesn't make much difference this afternoon. The principal thing is to locate the best flyways and feeding grounds."

"Who takes Bruno? He can't go with all of us," said Dick.

"You and Tom can take him to-day; by tomorrow we will know where he is needed most. I'll take Frank with me."

The Greased Lightning was securely fastened, and the boys separated, Tom and Dick with Bruno going out on the open bottom, while Thad and Frank made a circuit through the timber to see if the wildfowl used the wooded lakes to any extent. Nearly every lake contained a few ducks, but not enough worth bothering with; and Thad was quick to discover that the main body of wildfowl was feeding in the rice lakes and ponds on the bottom.

The last lake they went to, and the one nearest the bottoms, in fact they could see the bottoms through the scattered trees, Thad saw at a glance was an excellent place for ducks ordi-

narily. It was surrounded by trees, and along one side the tall canes of wild rice (or oats rather) extended two-thirds of the length. The lake terminated at the south end in a clear, narrow run not over twenty-five yards in width. But to-day, for some reason, the wildfowl were feeding on the open bottom lakes.

"Come on, Frank. Let's get out on the bottoms, that is where the ducks are to-day. I heard Dick and Tom shoot several times and we haven't had a shot. This ought to be a good lake though on a windy day."

They came out on the open meadow, well to the north of where Dick and Tom had gone, and saw ducks everywhere.

"Just as I expected, the ducks are in the rice lakes. Now keep your eye peeled and watch where they seem to center mostly."

Thad soon saw that most of the wildfowl passed up or down a chain of small lakes when they came in from the river.

"Come on, Frank, here is the place for us between these two lakes, and the grass is mowed, too."

A few moments later they were on the pass.

"Here is a little bunch of grass; I wonder if the haymakers left it on purpose for a blind."

Upon walking up to it, the boys found an old, worn-out mower that had been left in the field, and from shiftlessness or some other reason the haymakers had mowed around instead of re-

moving the obstruction. The result was an ideal blind for duck shooters, and in just the proper spot.

"Here is a snap, Frank," said Thad, seating himself on the broken frame, "a seat and mowed ground to drop our ducks on."

"This is jolly. You watch south and I'll watch north," Frank replied, seating himself.

"There go Tom and Dick," and Thad pointed to the south where two white puffs of smoke followed in quick succession, and two or three seconds later came the dull boom, boom of the guns.

"They must have killed the whole flock; I don't see any flying away."

"Lie low. Here comes a flock right at us," and Frank grasped his gun firmly.

"An overhead shot. You try them, Frank."

A dozen bluebills dashed over the blind, and Frank sent two charges of shot whizzing straight up in the air, but to no purpose. Then Thad turned quick as a flash, and cut down three.

"I must be too slow on the trigger," said Frank, considerably chagrined.

"You either stopped your gun or didn't hold far enough ahead. In fact I think you shot straight up in the air and trusted to luck," replied Thad smiling, as he started to pick up the birds.

"Thad, Thad, hurry up and get into the blind. Here is a flock."

Thad turned with the ducks in his hand, and saw a big flock of mallards coming, not twenty yards high. There was no time to reach the blind, so he slowly sank to the ground and lay motionless on his back.

Frank fervently hoped for better luck as he poked the gun through the grass. The sharp-eyed birds caught the glitter of the gun and sprang in the air, scattering in all directions. The range was so short it was almost like shooting at a mark, and as Frank centered on a big greenhead drake, he saw with supreme delight the bird wilt in the air. He was a little too slow with the second barrel, however, and only succeeded in getting a few feathers that floated down from the rapidly fleeing bird.

Then he heard two reports followed by a thump, thump, as Thad dropped a pair. The scattered flock got its decimated ranks together a few yards below and went on down the bottoms while Thad picked up his game and hurried to the blind.

"Watch whether Dick and Tom get any out of that bunch," said Thad.

The ducks, however, veered off to another lake before they reached the next hornet's nest.

From the frequent puffs of smoke, Tom and Dick were not idle. They had a good position at the north end of a lake, the farthest one to the south on the open meadow. To the north another lake separated by a thirty-yard strip

of uncut meadow grass formed the next link in the chain. Tom and Dick stood in the middle of the pass so the ducks would fall on the hard ground, where it was holiday sport for Bruno to find them in the grass.

“There are Thad and Frank now, out on the bottoms. See that puff of smoke to the north?” said Dick.

“There they go again,” said Tom presently. “See those mallards go up in the air?”

“They’ve dropped one,” cried Dick, “and there comes another.”

“Thad is poison on ducks,” said Tom.

Zip! A pair of teal went over their heads from the south only a few feet high, going a mile or two a minute. Dick gave them a charge for luck but it was an even race between the ducks and the shot with the chances in favor of the ducks on account of the start they had.

“That is what we get for not watching both ways,” said Tom.

“Yes, that would have been a beautiful head-on shot.”

“This chain of lakes seems to be the favorite flyway, but I don’t know but we ought to scatter out more in the morning.”

“We could kill more ducks that way; the only trouble would be in finding them, as only one could use the dog,” Dick replied.

“Jumpin’ John Rogers! Dick, see that flock of geese sailing around over the bottoms not

more than four rods high? They just came in from the river. Oh! if they would only come this way."

"Just our luck to have them go over Thad and Frank," said Dick, as they crouched in the grass.

"Say, Tom, here comes a big flock of mallards from the south. Shall we give it to 'em, or lie low for the geese?" whispered Dick.

"Better wait for the geese; they are old lunners."

The mallards swept by so close the boys could see the whites of their eyes, little dreaming that a distant flock of geese had saved them from annihilation.

"There they go over to Thad and Frank, just our luck," said Dick petulantly.

"No, they have turned and are coming this way," cried Tom in an ecstasy of delight.

The geese bore steadily along until Tom's and Dick's faces were wreathed in smiles and they began to nudge each other in anticipation, when the aggravating fowls turned and circled over the bottoms again.

"You old barnacles, you know better than to come this way," cried Dick, shaking his fist at the retreating birds.

"Too bad, but no use kicking," said Tom regretfully.

The wary birds circled over the meadow again and again, totally unconscious of the fact that

four pairs of sharp, eager eyes were watching every movement.

Now Thad and Frank would be thrown into a paroxysm of joy and crouch low in the blind with glistening eyes and beating hearts as the geese headed their way, only to have their hopes blasted and see Tom's and Dick's goose stock soar rapidly above par for a few minutes.

"The aggravating things," muttered Dick after the geese had headed his way two or three times, "we have lost half a dozen shots at ducks already. The next flock that comes along I'm going to sock it to 'em and let the geese go to thunder."

He was good as his word, for as the next bunch came up from the south, Dick smashed away.

Just as he pulled the trigger, Tom cried:

"Don't shoot. The geese are coming this way again."

"Too late. Life is too short anyhow to wait for geese that never come," replied Dick in disgust, as he sent Bruno after a bluebill he had knocked down.

"Look there," cried Tom.

The geese hearing the report turned honking and calling, and made a bee-line toward Thad and Frank.

"Wouldn't that make a fellow rob his grandmother," growled Tom in disgust, as he watched the great birds honking along north.

"Yes, sir; they're going straight over Thad and Frank. Now look out for squalls. Hades will let out for recess in a minute," cried Dick, beginning to get excited.

The geese had evidently decided that the locality was unhealthy, for they were heading north in great haste.

Suddenly a white puff of smoke leaped up, then another, then two more in quick succession, and Dick and Tom counted one, two, three great bodies falling from the sky, mangled with the boom, boom, boom, boom of the guns.

"Three old honkers. Bully!" shouted Dick, throwing up his hat just in time to frighten the daylights out of a pair of mallards that were stealing over them.

"If they had only come our way," sighed Tom.

"What's the difference? It's all in the family."

"So let the wide world wag as it will,
We'll be gay and happy still,"

sang Dick, who had recovered his good nature. "Let's go up where the boys are; it is getting along in the shank of the afternoon."

Numerous ducks were routed out on their way up the lakes, for they walked boldly along without any attempt at concealment. When near the head of the second lake, within a hundred yards of Thad and Frank, they stopped to watch

the great number of jack-snipe getting up from the soft mud, "scapeing," and darting in all directions.

Dick had just remarked: "We ought to put in one day on jacks," when a hen mallard sprang up within ten feet of him.

Both guns went to a level in a second and two charges of shot tore viciously past the big brown hen, but she fell not. Then another broadside went after her, but the daring fowl only quacked derisively and hurried away to meet some friends. The one comment, "Well, I'll be blowed," and two very sheepish-looking boys walked over to Thad's and Frank's blind.

"I wonder if the boys saw that circus," murmured Tom.

"Don't worry; they'll tell you about it," replied Dick consolingly.

"Did the old mallard fly out of your pocket?" inquired Thad, as the boys came up.

"Say, if you fellows have no objection we will discuss something else," replied Tom, setting down his gun.

"Yes, you and Frank dis, and Tom and I will cuss for not getting a shot at those geese," remarked Dick.

"They are dandies, aren't they?" said Frank.

"Old seed Canadas, sure," and Tom lifted one of the big, handsome birds. "Fat as butter, too."

"Say, boys," said Thad, "I'll tell you what

let's do. Go to camp and get a bite to eat and come back for an evening's shooting on these rice lakes."

"Good spiel. It strikes the undersigned favorably," remarked Dick, and Tom and Frank assented.

"Let's get a four dollar move on us then. How many ducks have you fellows got?"

"Fourteen," Tom replied.

"And we have twelve, and three geese. Come on."

They hurried across the bottoms, for the short autumn afternoon was rapidly wearing away. A cup of hot coffee was quickly made, which with bread and butter was swallowed with an utter disregard of all rules governing mastication, and with fine disregard of their digestion. But whoever heard of a young hunter or fisherman having trouble with his digestion? The only bother is in getting enough to eat.

"Boys," said Dick when their shell pockets had been replenished and they were ready to start, "there is a small lake just east of where Tom and I stood that I think will be a good one for evening shooting. I noticed mallards sailing around there all the afternoon."

"I believe Dick's head is level there. We spoke of that lake several times," said Tom.

"All right," said Thad, "we will take you fellows' word for it and go there. Too bad we only have one dog though,"

The rice lake mentioned was not over one hundred yards in length and fifty in width, and could be waded with hip boots. Tom and Dick stationed themselves at opposite sides of the lower end, while Thad and Frank took positions near the upper end.

Everybody was cautioned not to get excited and shoot toward his neighbor. Thad gave Frank an extra coaching after they got settled.

"Now, Frank," he said, "I don't know how thick they will come, but remember and don't get rattled if they are like a swarm of bees. Pick your duck and follow him, don't pay any attention to the others."

"I will try to remember," Frank responded lightly, for he thought Thad was overstating the situation a little.

The latter said no more but went across to his stand.

It was a clear, still evening when they crossed the bottoms and the declining sun hung low in the west. The winds had gone to sleep and a quiet peace brooded over the world. The only sign of life was the wildfowl circling over the lakes or winnowing the air high overhead on their way south; and myriads of migrating blackbirds.

The shooting soon began, and as the sun sank lower the ducks came in increasing numbers. That evening was long remembered by Frank Howard. It was his first introduction to an

evening seance with a swarm of buzzing, circling wildfowl.

Slowly the sun dipped below the horizon, and over the west a golden halo hung like the reflection from some mighty conflagration. As the fiery splendor slowly faded in the west the ducks seemed to think the last call had been sounded for supper, and the sight of such numbers swarming into those rice ponds was nerve-shattering to one not accustomed to seeing it.

Frank did fairly good work at first, for the ducks came at intervals and being mostly mallards were comparatively easy to hit. He chuckled quietly to himself to think how Thad had tried to guy him about getting rattled.

It was still daylight, but the uncanny purpling east gave token that darkness was near at hand, when inside of five minutes it looked as if every duck in the United States was trying to crowd in that little rice lake for supper. It was an excellent reproduction of bees swarming, with the odds in favor of the ducks in point of numbers.

Frank was fascinated with the sport at first. To have the big, handsome greenheads come sailing around within close range every few minutes was great fun, and he mentally voted it the finest sport in which he had ever indulged.

Pretty soon the birds came faster; the heavens seemed to be a great hopper from which ducks poured by the millions, and in a moment almost he found himself surrounded by more

ducks than he supposed were on earth. Vainly he tried to get aim on a bird. Others would come between, and the gun would swing after the nearer birds. Every moment he became more bewildered, until finally he set the gun down in despair, and watched with dumb wonder the dashing panorama of circling, crossing, whizzing ducks.

The other guns were belching forth death and destruction, and Frank soon saw what a cool head and a quick eye could do. When the flight was at its heaviest, Thad did not kill less than a duck a minute and sometimes two. While Frank wondered how he did it, Thad selected a bird, killed it, swung on another and killed that with as much coolness and precision as though they were the only two birds on the lake. The gun was broken in a second, two more shells inserted and the same thing repeated time after time.

Down at Dick's and Tom's end, flash followed flash, showing that those duck hunters had passed the excited stage and were holding down their job successfully.

In a short time it was all over. The light faded in the west, and a duck could only be seen on a line with the departed sun. The flight eased off as the ducks settled in the marshes, until there was only an occasional whirr of wings, with the shooter vainly peering into the purple gloom to locate the birds.

Thad shouted over the pond:

"Let's quit, boys. It's getting too dark."

An answering shout came from the foot of the lake, and Frank walked around to help Thad.

"What luck, Frank?"

"Don't ask me. Only five," in a disgusted tone from Frank.

Thad laughed. "I warned you."

"I know it, but I thought you were trying to guy me."

"No, I meant it. I went through the same thing when I started in."

"Yes, I see now you did," replied Frank dryly. "How many did you get?"

"Twenty, I think. I could have killed more, but had to drop them in a certain spot so I could be sure of finding them."

Tom and Dick with Bruno to help had thirty-five, and the combined load made all the boys wanted to carry to the boat, which was fortunately not far distant.

"Gee, I am tired and hungry, and no supper ready," sighed Dick, dropping his load and falling into a chair.

"I'll get supper," said Tom good-naturedly. "It's about my turn to take another whirl at it anyhow."

"Noble boy. Henceforth I am your bond servant."

While Tom started supper the others hung up the ducks, and then came the most enjoyable

part of the shoot, as the boys exchanged rubber boots for easy slippers, and lolled on chairs while they told of their hits and misses.

And that supper! Surely no meal ever prepared in the palace of a millionaire could compare with it in delicious flavor, seasoned with appetites that could have relished an old boot.

After supper, when everybody was feeling comfortable, Thad said:

“How are you fellows fixed, want to get out at daylight?”

Dense silence reigned and all gazed thoughtfully into the fire.

Thad laughed. “I guess you are all like me—too tired and sleepy.”

A vigorous nodding of three sleepy heads followed.

“Then I’ll tell you what let’s do; shoot jack-snipe to-morrow forenoon and start down the river after dinner.”

Everybody agreed to that proposition and the boys retired to dream of circling ducks and honking geese.

CHAPTER XIII.

JACK-SNIPE.

“What was the matter with you last evening, Frank? You didn’t seem to shoot much,” Dick inquired at the breakfast table next morning.

Frank was one of those sensitive, thin-skinned fellows who are easily disconcerted, and he reddened slightly under Dick’s keen, mischievous eyes; but finally laughed and said frankly:

“I might as well make a clean breast of it. I got so rattled and mixed up I couldn’t do a thing, so I quit trying. The ducks swarmed around me so thick I might as well have tried to hit bees swarming.”

“Was that your first introduction to that kind of shooting?” asked Tom.

“Yes. I never saw anything like it before.”

“The only wonder is you managed to get five,” said Thad. “I can remember shooting all one evening and only winging one mallard.”

"We all went through the same experience," said Tom. "You will get used to it after a few trips like that one last night."

After breakfast shell vests were filled with number 9's and the boys were ready.

"Now everybody scatter out for himself; wherever there is mud you will find snipe," said Thad, as they started over the bottoms.

It was another still, warm day, therefore an ideal one for snipe shooting. The birds were fat and lazy and soon a merry fusillade was in progress, as the boys spread over the bottoms. The snipe had evidently not been disturbed for they lay very close, and Thad, Dick, and Tom did fine execution.

Frank, however, whose experience with snipe had been very limited, did not fare so well. He could not get the idea into his head that he must not shut his left eye and get a bead as though shooting at a target; consequently many birds were out of range ere he could get a satisfactory aim, and he did not shoot. In a couple of hours he rounded up near Thad with four birds, and the latter asked:

"How you making it, Frank?"

"Not very good, I guess. I have only four; how many have you?"

"Fifteen. Come with me a while and let's see how you do it."

A few yards and Bruno pointed. "Now, Frank."

A zigzag flash of brown darted away and Frank's gun came to a level. After swaying it to the right and left until the snipe was sixty yards distant, he lowered the gun with a vexatious laugh.

"They are too quick for me. I can't get aim half the time until they are too far away."

"You try to get too good aim. Shoot the moment you see the bird over the barrel, hit or miss. Don't try to better your aim. Here is another. I will show you what I mean."

A snipe sprang from the mud, and Thad threw up the gun and cut it down at thirty-five yards. "You see I was fortunate to throw the gun right and killed this one; but if I had thrown the gun six inches out of line, I should have shot just the same and trusted to luck for an outside pellet to bring down the bird, as it requires but a slight blow to knock them down."

"I catch your idea," replied Frank, "but it is another thing to put it in practice successfully."

"Practice is all you need after you get the idea. Practice brings confidence, and that is what you want. Keep banging away as if you didn't care a continental whether you killed a snipe or not."

The next bird arose very close, and Frank sent a charge of shot across the mud ere it had gone five yards; but it went on with a derisive "scape."

"That bird was too close, and you made a snap-shot on him," said Thad.

"What is a snap-shot?"

"It is when you shoot the instant the gun touches the shoulder, regardless of where it is pointed. There are times when snap-shooting is necessary, as for instance in dense brush when shooting woodcock, but in open ground it is poor practice as the birds are frequently cut to pieces. The only time it is useful is when the birds rise wild and are liable to get out of range before you can get a legitimate shot."

The birds were numerous and Frank under Thad's instructions kept banging away, sometimes grassing his bird but oftener missing.

After an hour's shooting, however, Thad noticed that Frank's kills became more numerous. "You are getting onto it all right, Frank," he cried when the latter had successively rolled two snipe in the mud.

"Yes; if I keep up that gait I am afraid I will get the swell head," grinned Frank.

"Don't worry yet. You won't keep up that gait," said Thad consolingly. "Let's cross over to that little swale. It ought to be a good place for snipe."

They were crossing the meadow to the swale, when Thad suddenly stopped.

"Now what has Bruno got? Chickens I'll bet."

Bruno was rigid a few yards to the left, the

picture of statuesque repose. Not a muscle moved. To all appearances the dog had turned to stone.

"Change your shell for 6's," said Thad in a low tone.

As they approached the dog, Thad said warningly: "Be ready now, they are old, strong birds."

Whirr! Cut-cut-cut-cut, and big brown bird struck the ground with a thump at Thad's first barrel.

Whirr! Cut-cut-cut-cut, and a big brown bird tions. Bang, bang, bang, and the guns were empty.

Frank was hurriedly trying to get another shell in his gun, when another bird rose at one side and sailed away, only to be dropped at fifty yards by Thad.

"How do you change shells so quickly?" inquired Frank.

"Practice, practice, my son. Did you get any?"

"I think I winged one with the last barrel. They knock my nerves all to pieces when they roar up so suddenly, and I don't believe I came within four feet of the first one," replied Frank.

"You must learn not to have any nerves or leave them at home."

"I wish I could."

"You will after awhile."

Bruno retrieved four chickens and they

crossed to another lake. Just before reaching it Thad saw to the south a lone goose coming up the shore very low.

"Get in the grass quick, Frank," and crouching low they quickly gained the shelter of the rushes.

"Here is a chance for you to double up a single goose," Thad whispered.

Frank's eyes glistened and he murmured: "I'll fix him."

Crouched low in the rushes, the boys could just see the goose through the tops, slowly honking along, winnowing the air with steady wing-beats.

"Gee won't I smash him," murmured Frank, breaking his gun to be sure the shells were all right.

"He will never get by," whispered Thad grimly, "if you don't kill him I will."

It was a burning, outrageous shame, but after the boys had jollied and nudged each other and licked their lips in anticipation, they looked through the rushes just in time to see a blast of lightning hit that goose that knocked it forty ways for Sunday, and it crashed down in the rushes. At least it seemed to be lightning, for not a sound was heard when the big fowl doubled in the air so dead was it killed, but a second later came the sharp report of a gun, and the boys "tumbled."

"That is what I call a mighty mean trick,"

grumbled Frank, as they straightened up to see who the lucky shooter was.

"It is Dick, of course," grumbled Thad, and so it proved.

Now unbeknown to Thad and Frank, Tom from another lake had watched the whole proceeding. He saw the goose going up the lake, saw Dick dodge in the rushes, and a moment later saw Thad and Frank do the same. As Dick came tramping up the shore carrying the big Canada by the neck his face shining like the full moon, Thad and Frank stepped out of the rushes looking rather solemn.

"That was a scurvy trick to play on a couple of orphans when they had their mouths fixed to kill a goose."

Dick stopped and stared, then the situation dawning on him, he dropped the goose and laughed until his sides ached.

Tom came over where the others were, his mouth extended from ear to ear: "Don't say a word, I saw the whole thing."

"Don't you think Dick ought to go without his dinner?" asked Frank, trying to look solemn.

"Well—ahem. To tell the truth, I would rather not umpire this thing, for if I had been where Dick was I might have acted bad, too."

"The joke is on us, Thad," said Frank with a comical sigh of resignation.

"I am glad you mentioned dinner, for I am nearly starved," quoth Dick.

"It is almost noon. I suppose we might call it a half day," said Thad, looking at his watch.

"How much game have we, I wonder," said Dick, turning his pockets inside out.

Everybody did the same. Tom had twenty-three jack-snipe, and two ducks; Dick twenty-nine snipe and one goose; and Thad and Frank forty snipe and four prairie chickens.

"We lack four of eight dozen. We can get those on the way to camp. Come on; I'm hungry," cried Dick, starting off.

The four was increased to six and in addition a stray woodcock, before they reached the Greased Lightning, tired and hungry but in great spirits.

Tom set about getting dinner while Dick munched a fried-cake to stay his stomach.

"What's the matter with the crew getting this Mississippi liner out to sea, and eating our dinner on the bounding billows?" said Thad.

"The crew's shore leave don't expire until after dinner. I think the Commodore had better make out his manifest and get ready to ship," said Dick calmly.

"Don't talk mutiny or we will put you in the hold and batten down the hatches," said the Commodore sternly.

"Just so you batten the dinner down with me, I don't care," and Dick chewed away on his doughnut.

"You talk mutiny. As a penalty your din-

ner allowance is cut to two fowls, half a peck of potatoes, two cups of coffee, a loaf of bread, and quarter of a pie. Cook, see that the order is enforced."

"Aye, aye, sir. If there is grub enough."

Snipe shooting is a muscle-tiring, hunger-compelling pastime, and when our lads finally arose from the dinner table there wasn't grub enough left, as Tom expressed it, "to wad a shotgun."

Then the Greased Lightning was loosed from her moorings, poled out in the river, and sent drifting down the broad waterway.

CHAPTER XIV.

DICK TURNS ORNITHOLOGIST.

“Have you fellows any idea how far it is to the next town?” inquired Dick, when they were fairly afloat on the bosom of the blue waters shimmering in the sunlight.

“I have no more idea than that blue crane, but it can’t be over ten or fifteen miles,” Thad replied.

“See how the leaves are falling to-day. I hadn’t noticed their falling that way before,” said Frank, pointing to the densely wooded hills.

“They haven’t been dropping that way before,” replied Tom; “that sharp frost last night is what started them.”

In truth the leaves were falling, and rapidly too. From every wooded island, high up the towering hills on either side, the airy little truants, now that their mission was done, fluttered away from the mother tree. Caught by the light

north breeze they circled, eddied, and whirled gracefully through the forest with the soft murmur of pattering raindrops. Every shade of gold, crimson, green, and brown was represented in the picture delicately penciled by that weird artist, Jack Frost. Far up the hillside, surrounded by its fellows, a tree would be turned to blood. Another tried to outshine its companions with a cloak of gaudiest yellow. Still another retained its summer robe of green, pathetically holding the fort against the bombardment of its cruel foe—the Winter King. From the base of the hills to the summit, almost every color of the rainbow was represented, forming a picture of surpassing beauty; while far below as a background, a mile-wide band of steel blue rippled and danced in the shimmering sunlight.

The only subduing thought that disturbed the beholder gazing spell-bound on this magic scene, was the regret that such gorgeous splendor was the hectic flush of death.

“Did you ever see a picture that would beat that, Frank?” asked Thad, as the two sat drinking in the beauties of the scene from the deck of the Greased Lightning.

“No, I never did. I have seen many pictures by the old masters, in fact we have several at home, but all look cheap and trivial beside the brush of nature,” returned Frank quietly, and then added: “But this surpasses anything I ever saw even by Nature. No wonder you fel-

lows all love the Mississippi and swear by her."

"I tell you there's nothing too grand for the old girl on the upper river; I don't know how it is down South," put in Tom, who, although of a practical turn of mind, had an eye for beauty.

"The only thing that makes me sad is to think it is the forerunner of winter," remarked Thad.

"Shucks, that doesn't bother me a bit," said Dick. "I like winter. I like the cold, crisp air and the snow banks and the sliding down hill and the skating. I think it's fun to sit by the fire and watch the snow blow and whirl, and hear the wind howl around the house while a fellow is warm and jolly inside. Then think of the buckwheat cakes, maple syrup, sausages, and tenderloin. Yum, yum."

A dismal groan, a dropping of heads, and three boys were snoring vigorously.

Dick went on serenely. "I tell you, boys, there's nothing like it. Just imagine a morning twenty-seven degrees below zero, and sitting down to a breakfast of hot buckwheat cakes, maple syrup, tenderloin, and delicious coffee. By George, I would rather have winter than summer."

"Hanged if that animal don't make me hungry for buckwheat cakes," said Tom, sitting up and laughing.

That sally made everybody laugh.

Frank said: "Dick is a trump. He would make a wooden Indian hungry with his description. I wouldn't mind a few buckwheats myself."

"A very seductive cold-weather picture to a hungry man, I'll admit," said Thad.

"Boys," said Dick, slapping his leg, "as Thad says, I 'thunk a thought.'"

"Fire away," from Tom.

"Let's get some fresh buckwheat flour at some of these little jerk-water towns and have buckwheat cakes for breakfast."

Much to Dick's surprise everybody shouted "aye" instantly, causing him to remark: "You fellows exhibit a surprising amount of sense, considering." A quiet dig at their recent somnolent antics.

"Hold on. Who can make them?" asked Frank.

"Don't you worry," said Dick calmly. "I can beat the man that invented the flour. I learned from mamma."

"That settles our troubles there," said Tom.

"While I think of it," Frank remarked, "did any of you fellows ever read up on the Latin names of different varieties of ducks and snipe?"

"I did," responded Tom promptly, "and forgot it as fast as I read it. I never could remember those confounded jaw-breaking Latin names."

"Dick here is authority on duckology, I believe. He and I studied it all one winter," observed Thad.

"Come on, Dick, and exhale a little of your knowledge of wildfowl for the benefit of your ignorant companions," remarked Frank.

"Well, my young friends," said Dick thoughtfully, "our old parson down home taught us that it was our duty to enlighten the heathen at every opportunity, so I suppose I may as well begin right here."

"That isn't bad either," laughed Frank.

Dick pointed to the large number of wildfowl suspended in bunches from the outside of the Greased Lightning, and said:

"My young friends, that large, handsome duck with the green head is the *Anas boschas*, commonly known as the mallard. This bird has a peculiar habit of swarming in the rice lakes in the evening to feed in vast numbers, thereby causing young and inexperienced shooters to get badly rattled and mixed up. In fact I have known young shooters of a nervous temperament to set down their guns and not make an effort to shoot. Of course that happened long ago when I was young and ducks were plenty. The last case of duck ague that came under my observation happened to a young friend of mine. It occurred at least eighteen or twenty-hours ago, but I remember it quite well."

A vigorous hand clapping greeted this batch

of information, Frank, despite a very red face, joining in with the others.

"This small, grayish-brown duck with the ultramarine band across the wings, is the *Anas discors*, commonly called the blue-winged teal. In some localities it is known as the summer teal. It builds nests and lays eggs same as any other duck. It is easily killed when hit, but being a swift flyer it bothers some folks to do the hit act. I once saw a young friend of mine shoot at the head end of a flock of these birds and kill one flying along behind in the next county."

"Maybe the gun scattered," said Thad *sotto voce*.

"This duck is a fine table bird, always fat as butter in consequence of being a great feeder like some people I know." (Cries of *hear! hear!*)

"Stop looking wise and smirking at each other behind the speaker's back, gentlemen." (Cries of *go on! go on!*)

"**This** gray duck with the white belly is the well known *Anas strepera*."

"Blamed if I ever heard of it before," interjected Tom.

"Its common, every-day name," the professor went on, "is gadwell."

"Oh," from Tom.

"It also has a number of other names among the hunters over the country, such as grayduck,

sand-widgeon, creekduck, and so forth. This simple-minded fowl is one of the easiest ducks to decoy that flies. A few old wooden imitations huddled together is all that is necessary to bring it near enough to hit with a club. Like a great many people, instead of investigating it depends too much on appearances, and consequently gets badly fooled. Thomas, you may leave your seat long enough to get me a slice of jelly cake and a glass of water."

Tom obediently vanished in the pantry and returned with four large pieces of cake and a glass of water.

"Thank you. One slice would have been sufficient, but as you have taken the trouble to bring them, I will—"

"Never mind," Tom interrupted hastily, "Thad and Frank and I will hold these three slices until you are ready for them." Tom distributed the cake and the three boys proceeded to "hold it."

Dick took a sup of water, bit off a generous section of cake, and resumed: "Here is a duck, my children, that is ever surrounded with pleasant associations. It is the *Anas americana* or American widgeon. It has an indescribably sweet, soft, silvery, whistling call which it gives forth as it migrates northward in the spring, and I assure you after a person has passed through a long, cold winter,"—"On buckwheat cakes and sausage," Tom remarked to Thad and

Frank—"the cry of this harbinger of spring is doubly welcome. It also has a great variety of common names in various parts of the country. Some of them are—baldpate, baldface, wheatduck, baldcrown, whitebelly, and so forth. This duck also is easily decoyed, and where it congregates in big flocks, is found in large numbers."

"That is funny. Make a note of that last remark, Frank," said Tom.

Dick continued between bites: "I now come to a duck, my little friends, that furnishes more sport on the Mississippi to decoy shooters than any duck we have. I refer to the *Aythya affinis*, or lesser scaup-duck."

"Gosh all hemlock! Has a common cubhead got all them fancy names?" asked Tom.

"The proper name for this chap is the blue-bill, but it has a different name in nearly every locality. Where we live it is called the cubhead. In other places it is known as bluebill, blackhead, raft-duck, bullet, whistler, flocking-fowl, and many other names."

"That's enough for all practical purposes," put in Tom.

"These ducks are hard to hit and hard to kill, and are just moderately good eating. When feeding on rotten snails and other truck like that, they are a little better than an owl, and not quite so good as a blue crane. However, if the grub is good they are not to be sneezed at, especially if a fellow is hungry."

"Guess you don't do much sneezing then," remarked Thad in an undertone, which remark raised a titter.

"No laughing on the back seats, please," warned the professor.

"Professor, would you kindly batten down your hatches a minute while we take a squint for sandbars and other obstructions?" inquired the Commodore politely.

"Certainly. I need some refreshments anyhow," and Dick went after more cake while Thad swept the river with the glass.

No obstructions being noted, the crew again took seats ready to drink in more wisdom.

"Before leaving the bluebill," the professor continued, "I will remark that there are two varieties of them—the greater scaup and the lesser scaup, or the big bluebill and the little bluebill. The big bluebill I do not see here. We kill a few every season, but they are not very plenty in the interior, being a coast duck. They are about the size of a pintail and marked almost exactly like this little bluebill. As Frank appears to be taking notes of the game, I will say for his benefit that the name of the large variety is *Aythya marila*.

"This duck, children, you will observe is about the size and general appearance of the bluebill. In fact many unsophisticated shooters think it is the bluebill, but they are badly off their whirl. It is the *Aythya collaris*, or ring-

neck." Dick held up side by side the two ducks that chanced to be tied in the same bunch.

"You will notice the feathers on the back of the bluebill are a fine gray and black, while the ringneck has a black beak. You also see the ringneck has a brown band around the neck from whence it derives its name. Also take note of the white band across the bill. As usual it has a great variety of names, such as—ringbill, marsh bluebill, blackjack, bastard broadbill, moonbill, and so forth. It flies in large flocks and decoys beautifully.

"I now come to the friend of our boyhood days, the *Aix sponsa*, or woodduck; the bird upon which most of us fleshed our maiden swords. Well do I remember crawling down through the deep woods in August, up to the bank of a hidden pond where half a dozen woodies were perched on a log in a row, like turtles asleep in the sun, poking the muzzle of my old gun over the bank and blowing the whole outfit off the log at one shot. I am heartily ashamed of it now, children, since arriving at man's estate,"—"Man's estate is good," from Tom in an undertone—"but then it was a ground-hog case. Our motto was, anyway to get ducks. The full plumaged male is the most beautiful duck that winnows the air or squeals over the forest pools. It is fond of acorns, and I have seen them swarm into an oak thicket at dusk, like pigeons. It isn't worth a cent to decoy, but is lovely baked with sweet potatoes.

“This large, graceful duck with the long neck and the pointed tail is the *Dafla acuta*, or pintail. It is the first duck North in the spring, and has a disagreeable habit of flying about eleven miles high and consequently out of gun shot. It decoys nicely, but owing to a habit of teetering up and down over decoys, the shooter is very apt to merely tear a jagged hole in the atmosphere and the pintail rapidly emigrates, while the shooter swears, jaws, or holds his temper, according to his bringing up. This duck has many aliases—spiketail, springtail, smee, spindletail, and a lot of other tails and names. I do not consider it a very delicious table bird although some folks bank on it.

“This rainbow-tinted fowl I hold in my hand is the *Spatula clypeata*, or spoonbill. Observe what an absurdly large, broad, black bill it has, according to its size. One naturally supposes they made the bill first and then ran short of material to make the body according. It is a very foolish bird, easy to approach and easy to kill, compared with other ducks. This duck has been greatly lauded as a table bird by people who ought to know better. When I read of such men as Audubon praising its gastronomical qualities, I feel like tackling a blue crane to take the taste out of my mouth. It is possible, however, that these people happened to be very hungry when they praised these ducks and had nothing else to eat. Under such circumstances

I forgive them, for I would praise anything.”
 —“That is no jolly,” from the audience—“I have killed a great many of these ducks, was brought up with them in fact, but I never yet saw a very fat one, and a duck to be at its best must be well larded with fat. It has many names over the country; namely, shoveler, broadbill, shelldrake, butler-duck, and many others.”

Here came a vigorous snapping of fingers.
 “Teacher!”

“Well, Thomas, what is it?”

“Say, teacher. Maybe those fellows got hold of young, tender birds, and you never killed anything but old, tough cripples.”

“Thomas Evans,” said the professor severely, “do you mean to insinuate that I can’t kill anything but cripples?”

“No—o,” replied Tom, slightly abashed; “I thought maybe it just happened that way.”

“Never mind what you thought, sir,” retorted the professor sternly. “You are not supposed to be old enough to think much.”

He then continued:

“I see before me a single specimen of the king of all ducks, the *Aythya vallisneria*, or canvasback. Like some people, it hasn’t ballast enough for its reputation, and consequently is a little top heavy. I have seen this bird when it was the equal of a mallard in flavor. Then again I have eaten it when a sawbill feeding on

decayed minnows was a piece of jelly cake in comparison. By the way, Thomas, you might get me a small piece of cake. Talking makes me hungry."

A few moments later the professor cut a crescent out of a slice of cake and continued:

"This bird can fly swifter and dive farther than any other duck that floats. Observe the long, slim, loon-like shape of the head. The bill starts from the top of the head and runs to a point like a wedge. I suspect somebody ate one of these birds once when it had fattened on celery, and got mashed on the flavor. Consequently people think every canvasback tastes the same way, but they do not. When it feeds on ordinary truck like other ducks it is no better than others.

"I notice in this lot of birds another duck that resembles the canvasback greatly; namely, the *Aythya americana*, or redhead. In fact many people cannot tell the difference, but the telltale bill and head give it away. Observe the head is more chunky, and the bill is scooped out on top like a turned up nose. Then the bill of this duck is blue while that of the canvasback is black. We kill many of these ducks on the Mississippi in the spring, but very few in the fall.

"I now come to a duck, my little friends, that I contemplate with feelings of deep emotion. I refer to the *Charitonetta albeola*, or buffle-

head. I am free to say that this little, insignificant bird caused me more trouble and vexation of spirit, in trying to kill it entirely dead, than any duck in the country. I found no difficulty in knocking it down and half killing it, but the little rascal would always get up and fly away just before I could get my hands on him. However, one of his numerous names is 'spirit-duck,' so that may account for it. It is three-fourths feathers, and the balance cast iron, or something equally tough. It is variously known as spirit-duck, butterball, conjuring-duck, dipper, butter-duck, woolhead, and so forth. Its edible qualities are better than a rat but not as good as a ferret.

"Does any one know who killed this duck?" the professor inquired, lifting a fowl from the bunch in which it was tied.

"I did," announced Tom, raising his hand with considerable pride.

"You made a valuable kill, Thomas."

The afore-mentioned Thomas at once grew several inches.

"A very valuable kill," mused the professor. "My friends, I will first touch on the edible qualities of the bird. It has no edible qualities. The meat somewhat resembles rank bull beef stretched tight over a clothes-horse." Tom shrank a little in size. "In fact I doubt very much if the Almighty intended it for food, and the probabilities are it was not in the ark."

“What is it?” inquired the audience with considerable curiosity.

“It is the *Clangula hyemalis*, commonly called old-squaw, south-southerly, long-tailed duck, and many other names.”

“No wonder it isn’t fit to eat with all them names,” muttered Tom.

“Thank goodness,” the professor continued, “very few of these ducks come this way, so we are spared the tribulation of trying to eat them.

“Here is another duck,” stopping long enough to swallow the last bite of cake, “that is not very common here in the fall. I refer to the *Glaucionetta clangula americana*, or golden eye.”

“For Lord’s sake, let up till I get my jaw back in place,” groaned Tom with a grimace.

“This duck has many names, among them being whistler, brasseye, whistlewing, bullhead, ironhead, and whiffer. It also cuts a poor figure at the table, especially if served up in company with the mallard, teal, or woodduck.

“Ah, my little friends, we have something here worth talking about,” and professor Dick triumphantly held up a brown bird. “You will pardon me, I know, if I exhibit some emotion over this beautiful creature.”

A faint groan from Thad’s direction.

“This bird, my children, is the *Philohela minor*, or American woodcock. If not the king of game-birds, it is a close second. In regard

to its edible qualities, it is simply angel food. Just melts in the mouth like a juicy, tender, porterhouse steak. It is found in low, damp swales in the woods, and as it goes whizzing through the dense brush, taxes the skill of the shooter to the utmost.

“While I am discussing this bird, I will relate how a young friend of mine killed his first woodcock.”

Here Thad spoke up hastily:

“I wish to be excused, please. I have a severe case of the colic,” and he disappeared around the corner of the Greased Lightning instanter.

“Excuse me, please. I have the botts awful,” cried Tom, as he shinned away.

“I fear I am threatened with appendicitis, teacher. I must go and stand on my head a few minutes,” said Frank, trying to hold himself together long enough to get around the corner.

Then Dick heard a yell of laughter that frightened a flock of geese four miles high. When he got around the corner to the other side, he found all three boys climbing into the skiffs and casting off the painters.

“Hold on,” he yelled, “I’ll quit.”

“Not till you swear to it,” called Tom.

“I’ll do anything. Only don’t desert the ship,” said Dick when he could get his voice together.

Then the boys came back.

"Don't you ever try to spring that old chestnut again, young fellow," warned Thad, as he fastened the skiff.

"All right. I'll be good. I didn't suppose you fellows would take it to heart so," said Dick meekly.

"Even a worm will turn if you step on him often enough," said Tom.

"The joke of it is I never heard this woodcock story," laughed Frank.

"You didn't?" asked Thad in amazement.

"Never."

Then Thad told the story of Dick's first woodcock exploit, and how he had bragged about it ever since.* Of course he embellished the yarn considerably, and had the boys laughing until the woods rang.

"The moral to that story is, don't get the swell head because you make a scratch shot," remarked Tom.

"Say, Dick," said Frank, "you didn't tell us what a jack-snipe is."

"*Scolopax wilsoni*," replied Dick. "I was just coming to that when you fellows all started for the hospital."

"While I think of it, Dick, has a measly, old mud-hen got a high-toned name, too?" asked Tom.

"Certainly. They are *Fulica americana*."

"It ought to be darned foolica Americana," laughed Tom.

*See "The Boy Duck Hunters," page 60.

"I don't see how you keep all those names in your head, Dick," said Frank.

"How do you keep the multiplication table in your head?" asked Dick.

"Why, I learned it of course," replied Frank laughing.

"And I learned these names the same way, by committing them to memory. A person can memorize anything in which he takes an interest."

"Town ho!" shouted the lookout.

"Where away?"

"Three points to the sta'bard of that flock of blackbirds."

The Commodore took the glass. "It is a town sure. And right around the bend close to us. All hands get to sacking game."

In anticipation of some such event, the boys had brought along a number of gunny-sacks. The game was quickly packed in these, tagged to a well-known commission firm in Chicago, with a letter of instruction to remit to Mr. Kingston at home. Thad hastily scratched a note to his father in explanation, Dick added a postscript to his mother, and they were ready.

In a short time the Greased Lightning swung along shore and Thad and Tom ran up town to find the express office. Fortunately they found the delivery wagon at the office, and quickly returned perched on the seat with the driver. The game was loaded in, receipts taken, and they were free to go.

Thad was just giving orders to weigh anchor, when Dick cried out:

“For Heaven’s sake, stop. ‘Hold her nozzle agin the bank’ a minute; we have forgotten something.”

“What’s up now?” inquired the Commodore.

“Buckwheat flour. Come on, Tom.”

“Depend on that boy to remember something to eat,” laughed Thad, as Tom and Dick started up town.

“They found it all right,” grinned Frank a few minutes later, as Tom and Dick appeared in sight, each with a sack on his shoulder.

“There, put to sea with your old tub whenever you are ready. We can defy fate and the elements now with two sacks of old-fashioned country buckwheat flour,” said Dick in heartfelt tones, as he deposited his burden on the cabin floor.

“How do you know it is genuine?” said Thad, as the Greased Lightning slowly swung out in the river.

“How do I know, you goose? Didn’t the man say it was genuine?” replied Dick scornfully.

This was said with such sublime simplicity that Thad, Tom, and Frank laughed outright.

When Thad found his voice he said:

“You little innocent, couldn’t the man lie to you?”

“I never thought of that,” confessed Dick.

“Seems to me you are getting blamed suspi-

cious," he added. "Does everybody get suspicious as they grow up?"

"I guess so," replied Thad; "only grown people don't call it suspicion; they call it 'business principles.' "

"Why didn't you get some sausage, Dick?" inquired Frank.

"Oh, we can worry along on snipe, duck, and quail, I guess; to say nothing of bacon, ham, squirrels, and other kinds of meat," replied Dick, as he went in to examine his buckwheat flour.

CHAPTER XV.

TRAPPING AGAIN. HOME.

The sun was sinking when the Greased Lightning tied up for the night some miles below the town where the boys had shipped their game.

The haze of a glorious Indian summer evening hung over the landscape like a purple veil through which the sun shone with a softened light, a huge globe of gold.

When the boys landed supper was ready. After getting outside of the usual amount of provender, the usual bout at chess was in order in which Frank won a signal victory over Dick, after an hour and a half's able maneuvering.

"I can stand it. I am three games ahead of you still," said Dick with a yawn, as he arose from the board and walked over to the other game.

"How are you fixed, Tom; got him about sewed up?"

"No, I'm afraid it's the other way. He is driving me hard," replied Tom with knitted brows.

Thad grinned triumphantly. "I think you will capitulate shortly, Thomas."

Dick studied the game intently a few moments and said: "I can win that game for Tom in a jiffy, if you want me to."

"If you can win that game for Tom, go ahead," said Thad defiantly.

"Do you see it, Frank?" asked Dick, turning to the former.

"I must confess I don't," replied Frank, who had been looking the game over also.

"Go ahead, Mr. Paul Murphy, and show us," said Thad ironically.

"Take my seat and play it out, Dick. Blamed if I can see what you mean," said Tom, arising.

Dick took the chair and after looking over the board again to be sure he was making no mistake, boldly sacrificed his rook and bishop for two pawns that had been a thorn in Tom's side, by blocking his maneuvers.

"Playing give-a-way?" said Thad listlessly, as he picked off the men.

"Yes; check. Your queen is in danger also," replied Dick coolly, leaning back in his chair. He had double-checked Thad's king and queen with the knight.

"Whew! That looks stormy. There was some method in the boy's madness after all," said Thad, looking concerned.

"You never can recover from that blow. Dick can gallop his queen over the board at his leisure and clean up your pawns while he harasses you by checking," remarked Frank, after reviewing the situation.

"I think that diagnosis is correct, therefore black resigns," said Thad, arising with a yawn and stretching himself to the limit.

"I won't count that game against you, Thad, for I was beaten if Dick hadn't seen that *coup d'etat*," Tom observed consolingly.

"Count it if you want to," Thad replied good-naturedly, as he prepared for bed.

That was one characteristic possessed by Thad, and in fact by all four boys, that did much toward making their voyage a trip of unalloyed pleasure. Petty annoyances, such as being beaten at chess or any other game; killing a less number of birds; being the butt of a harmless joke; and a dozen other trivial things that are liable to spring up in camp life, were passed over in good humor.

It is a trait of character worthy of emulation, especially by people thrown into close companionship for a brief time out in the woods. Let there be no sulking; no bickering over trivial things; no heart burning or jealousies as to who kills the most game or catches the greater number of fish; no brooding over fancied slights, nor shirking of duties; no continual goading of a companion who makes some slight mistake. If

there is, good-bye to the pleasure in that crowd. One person of a discordant disposition can keep a whole company irritated, and make a trip for pleasure a complete and absolute failure.

"Did you forget those buckwheat cakes, Dick?" called Frank from the bedroom.

"Not much," was the reply; "the yeast cake has been soaking for an hour. I am just going to mix them," and Dick was soon pounding and thumping buckwheat batter with a vim.

"It beats all how this weather holds on," remarked Thad next morning, as he looked out and saw the promise of another hazy, quiet day.

"It beats all how those buckwheat cakes came up, too," said Dick, who had slipped out of bed in his nighty to take a peep at the cakes.

"That's so. Buckwheat cakes and maple syrup, Tom," cried Frank, springing out of bed with unusual alacrity. "And ham and eggs," supplemented Tom, following after.

"I thought I could start you fellows," said Dick with a grin, as he began dressing.

Ere long the savory odor of frying ham was in the air, and the boys were passing out and in to get a whiff of fresh morning air and then to toast their backs at the fire, for there was just chill enough in the air to make a fire feel delicious.

"Do you suppose this syrup is genuine?" asked Tom, as he poured a thick veneer of maple syrup over a couple of hot buckwheats.

"I think it is," replied Thad gravely. "It came wrapped in a Vermont newspaper and, according to Dick, that insures its genuineness."

"Now, smarty. I guess I'm not quite a fool if I don't suspect everybody," said Dick, turning up his nose.

"Say, lads, it would be middling juicy if we could strike a bee-tree," remarked Tom.

"Don't mention it," groaned Dick. "And not one of us knows a thing about finding them."

"I believe I could find one," said Tom. "I have been with bee hunters several times."

"If you wish the esteem of this company, find us a bee-tree," said Dick, putting another batch of buckwheats on the griddle.

"All right. I'll tackle it at the next camping place," said Tom.

All day the boys floated with the current, loafing, chatting, dodging sandbars and snags, getting occasional shots at ducks and geese, and filling in the time shooting with the rifles. At sundown they had tied up to the bank, and continued their journey next day.

At the close of the second day they arrived at another favorable-looking spot where the bluffs dropped away from the river. A heavy forest covered the lowland, giving promise of hidden lakes and ponds. A narrow run with very little current emptied into the Mississippi, into

which the Greased Lightning was poled out of the way of winds and waves.

When everything had been made fast, Thad and Tom shouldered their guns, and calling Bruno, started up the run to get the lay of the land, which they found soon opened out into a lake or slough lined with rushes.

The boys had barely arrived at the mouth when four mallards sprang up with vociferous quacks and a great fluttering of wings. The guns came up like a flash, four reports followed and three of the ducks dropped back into the water.

"Pretty good beginning," said Thad with a smile, as Bruno retrieved the birds.

"Yes. It looks as though we wouldn't starve here anyhow."

They followed the slough several hundred yards, noting numerous muskrat-houses and runs, and routing out a number of ducks.

As the hour was getting late, they retraced their steps and returned to camp with seven mallards.

Dick and Frank had busied themselves preparing supper, which was almost ready when Thad and Tom came in.

"More ducks, eh? What did you see?" said Dick, peering over from the stove.

"This run widens out into a rice lake that is a lovely place to jump mallards," replied Thad, putting away his gun and doffing his hunting coat.

“And it’s full of rat-houses, too,” added Tom.

“Didn’t find a bee-tree, Tom?” from Frank.

“Not yet, my child. They won’t be ripe until to-morrow.”

After supper it was planned that Thad and Frank should take the traps in a skiff, go up the run out in the lake and set them on the rat-houses, while Tom and Dick were to look for bee-trees.

This program was carried out. In the morning Tom and Dick with ax, pail, compass, and so forth, struck out through the woods on their quest for hidden sweets, and Thad and Frank went up the run with the traps.

Bruno was left to do guard duty at home.

Thad and Frank set traps along the run and out in the lake, following the latter to the end about half a mile. Numbers of ducks were feeding alongshore in the rice, and Thad killed three, although being busy setting the traps they made no effort to hunt. About noon they returned to the houseboat, well satisfied with the morning’s work.

Bruno was dozing in the sun, but Tom and Dick had not returned.

“We may as well start dinner, the boys will be hungry as bears,” remarked Thad.

Dinner was prepared and one o’clock came, but no boys. About two-thirty, just as they began to get uneasy, the sound of voices was heard and the bee hunters hove in sight. Thad and

Frank felt much relieved, but what particularly caught their eyes and sent their hats in the air with a shout of joy was a pail carried between the boys on a pole, heaped high with delicious-looking honey.

“Hurrah for the bee hunters!” shouted Frank.

“You fellows are trumps. I had no more idea you would find a bee-tree than you would a gold mine; Tom must be a scientific bee hunter,” said Thad, as the boys came on board and eased down their burden of flaky sweetness.

Dick dropped into a chair and said:

“You bet. Tom is all right. I tell you, boys, there is nothing like science. It’s the greatest thing that ever came over the pike; especially bee science.” And Dick went off into a paroxysm of laughter that continued until he fell off the chair.

Tom’s face reddened as he watched Dick nearly expiring with laughter, but his good nature predominated and he also burst out laughing. Thad and Frank gazed on this little drama in amazement.

“What the deuce is the matter with you two fellows; did you buy this honey somewhere?” asked Thad in a bewildered way.

“Not much. We found a bee-tree and there is another pail of honey in it, yet,” replied Dick, getting on his feet and straightening his face.

“Something is up. Tell us about it,” said

Frank, whose curiosity was aroused by Dick's peculiar actions.

"I'll tell you nothing until we get something to eat. I'm hungry enough to eat a loon; and, Gee! but I'm tired."

"Come in and fill up then; there is plenty left," said Frank, leading the way into the cabin.

Tom and Dick proceeded to clear off the remainder of the dinner while Thad and Frank waited to hear about their trip.

"Now, Dick, tell us how you found the honey."

Dick rubbed his stomach contentedly and said: "Why, you see we started out through the woods and after a bit Tom began to look around wise and mysterious-like."

"Don't get in any fancy curly-cues now, it is bad enough," broke in Tom.

"Then he began to catch bees and fill them full of glucose. After he had filled up about a peck of bees on syrup he made a few passes with his hands and started off through the woods on a dog trot."

"Oh, let up," cried Tom, trying to keep from laughing.

"He ran about four miles and then stopped and looked around solemn as an owl, and said we were right close to a bee-tree. We examined every tree on the quarter section, but couldn't find a sign of a bee. Then Tom commenced

his monkey-shines with bees again. After we had chased imaginary bee-trees until I was played out, he gave it up in disgust and owned he couldn't find a bee-tree in a month. Then we started back to camp and about half way here we ran plump into a bee-tree accidentally. Just happened to see them going in and out of the hole about twenty feet from the ground. There we have been ever since, cutting down the tree and getting the honey. Tom is just the right kind of a fellow to write a book about bee-trees, because he doesn't know anything about it."

Tom looked as though he was half vexed yet half enjoyed Dick's story, and when the latter had finished, said with a grin:

"Blamed if that isn't right. We looked all over the whole bottoms without finding anything and then stumbled onto one as we were coming home."

"Never mind. All's well that ends well," remarked Thad consolingly.

Soon after Tom had finished his dinner, he accompanied Thad and Frank back to the tree and they brought in the remainder of the honey.

"Now we won't have to depend on imitation maple syrup for our cakes," said Dick with a satisfied air, when the honey had been stored away.

"You had better telegraph home to have a barrel of sulphur ready, for you are liable to have a well developed case of buckwheat itch by the time you get there," said Thad.

“Guess I won’t have it any worse than the rest of you,” replied Dick.

The boys now settled down to trapping, fishing, gathering nuts, and hunting in earnest; and a week of quiet contentment glided by.

October, the month of peaceful Indian summer-time is the most delightful period of the year to be in the woods. Those little insect pests of camp life having been killed by the sharp frosts, no longer annoy campers. Nature, wrapped in the brilliant drapery of autumn, has then fallen into a peaceful lethargy, and the soft autumnal zephyrs, whispering through the scarlet leaves, sing the requiem of golden summer-time now past and gone. The crisp, cool air charged with the health-giving ozone, sends the blood bounding through the veins with increased vigor. The chattering squirrel stores his winter home with nuts against the icy blasts of winter; and the wildfowl flutter in the lakes and marshes on their way to the sunny South.

No wonder our young voyagers saw with regret the halcyon days glide by, although every moment was thoroughly enjoyed. They had been favored with an unusually long period of fine weather, but even pleasant weather must have an end, and one morning the boys awoke to find a drizzling rain and lowering skies.

After breakfast, Thad, who was a close observer of the weather, remarked with a shake of the head:

"Boys, I don't like the looks of this. I say, take up the traps to-day if it *is* drizzling. It is getting late in the season and the weather is liable to whew around any time now and freeze our traps up tight as Davy Jones' locker. Then we would have a nice time chopping them out for they are nearly all in the water."

"Thad's head is horizontal on that proposition, and I second the motion," said Tom.

In three hours every trap was in the Greased Lightning.

"Now let her get cold," said Thad in a satisfied tone, as they toasted their shins by the cozy fire.

"We don't want to get frozen in here," said Dick.

"Not much danger of that, it is too early," replied Tom. "But it isn't too early to freeze up the lakes and ponds."

Thad proved a reliable weather prophet, for the next morning a chill northeast wind was shrieking and howling through the forest, and the once blue sky was blanketed with cold-looking, gray clouds that went scudding through the air.

"Who says Thad isn't a weather prophet?" said Frank, peeping out of the window, while Tom hurriedly dressed in the raw air.

"Thad is all right as 'Old Probs,'" and Tom hustled around to get the fire started.

"Gee, this fire isn't slow," shivered Dick, as

he hastily slid into part of his clothes and hugged the stovepipe.

"This will be a famous morning for buckwheats, Dick," called Frank.

"That's what. And the batter will never hold out either. That's what is bothering me," and Dick glanced apprehensively over to the buckwheat crock.

"Ducks, ducks, everywhere! See them go!" cried Thad from the window. Thad was right. The ducks were going, and rapidly, too. High in the air and low over the water, big flocks and little flocks swept along before the blast with all the speed in their powerful wings.

"That lake where we had the traps will be a hummer to-day, I'll bet," said Dick, craning his neck to look out over the river.

"It probably will, as it is sheltered and plenty of feed there," replied Tom.

"I suppose we could load this boat with ducks and geese if we wished," said Thad, "but the question is, do we want to?"

"We certainly don't want to kill any more than we can use," Tom replied.

"Of course we could ship them as we did the other day, but I dislike the idea of turning market hunter. We did that the last time just so we could all have one good shoot," said Thad, coming back to the fire.

"I think that is a sensible view of the matter," said Tom thoughtfully. "Ducks are becoming

scarcer every year, and the fewer we kill the more there will be left for next year."

"I'm agreeable. I'm not anxious to get out in this cold storm," said Frank, laughing.

"Of course we will kill a few, but not any more than we can use," said Thad, burying his face in a wash basin of cold water.

"I will deliver my opinion after breakfast," quoth Dick.

"Of course there will be a little self-denial in it for all of us, as we are all very fond of shooting, but I don't think one of us will ever regret that he refrained from killing a great lot of ducks that he couldn't use," said Thad, seating himself by the stove.

We regret that the boys failed to keep a record of the number of buckwheat cakes eaten that morning, as we are satisfied it would have broken the record for all time to come.

After breakfast they donned extra warm clothing and walked up the run to the lake.

They could plainly hear mallards quacking and screaming through the timber before reaching their destination.

"A dozen and a half is our limit now remember, boys," said Thad as they neared the lake.

As the ducks were swarming and the number to be killed limited, all four agreed to remain together so Bruno could do the retrieving. Stationing themselves in some low willows at the head of the lake where the ducks swept down

from the north or circled back from the south, they were ready.

"Now let's take turns shooting first. After the first man shoots, everybody bang away to suit himself," said Thad.

"All right. The Commodore shoots first," replied Tom.

"Here come four," whispered Dick, and two pairs of greenheads swept chattering by from the north.

Thad killed one with each barrel, and at the report a roar of wings was heard and the air was filled with screaming, quacking mallards arising from the lake below.

"Here come six from the south; give Frank a show."

The big handsome birds came fluttering along slowly. "Don't lose your nerve, Frank," warned Dick.

Frank replied by smashing a bird with each barrel, and as they climbed frantically toward the clouds, Dick and Tom each dropped another. The ducks were soon swarming back to the sheltered lake and the four guns boomed and banged away steadily, keeping Bruno busy piling up the mallards.

In a very short time Thad counted up sixteen, most of them three pounders. He looked up to tell the boys to go slow, when there came a banging and cracking like a salvo of artillery and three more ducks dropped almost at his feet.

"Hold on," yelled Thad. "Shut off steam and stop the machine, we are one over the limit now."

"Get us away from here or we will be a lot more over the limit," cried Dick, in whose veins the fever of shooting was running high.

"Let's take the shells out of our guns or we can never stay bottled up with this mess of tomato preserves around us," said Tom with a laugh, suiting the action to the word.

"It is tough, boys, I know, but they will keep," laughed Thad, as they stood a few moments watching the swarms of mallards gracefully circling and dropping with bowed wings in the lake.

"Come on, let's get out of here or I'll be throwing clubs at them in a minute," said Dick in disgust, picking up some of the ducks.

The rest of the day and the day following, the boys remained indoors most of the time, playing chess, reading, cracking nuts, and indulging in other amusements; while the tempest roared through the forest and lashed the river to foam.

The third morning the sun rose on a calm and peaceful world. There was nothing to indicate that the elements had been on a two days' spree, howling and tearing over the earth in a drunken frenzy. A few cakes of skim ice drifted along, the vanguard of the mighty masses to come later.

Our young voyagers decided to start for

home, not caring to risk being caught in the heavy ice, and by ten o'clock the Greased Lightning was out on the Mississippi and on her way South once more. Along in the afternoon as they sat out on deck in the pleasant sunshine, Thad suddenly turned to Tom and said:

"How would you like to wear diamonds, Tom?"

"Ask me something easy, for I never even saw any," replied Tom indifferently.

"Well, pull yourself together and hang on to the safety-valve for I am going to spring something on you."

"What's up now?" said Tom, a strange, half-longing look coming into his eyes at Thad's words, while Frank looked interested.

Then Thad told them the dead outlaw's story of the cave and the buried treasure, and showed them the rude drawing of the bluffs and location of the cavern. He told Tom and Frank that he and Dick were going to share the diamonds with them if they could be found.

"It is square and kind in you and Dick to even share the diamonds, but I don't suppose we will find them; it would be too good luck," said Tom with a wistful look.

"Don't worry about that; the gold was found a good while ago," said Thad quietly.

"The devil it was," and Tom leaped four feet straight in the air and then sank back in his chair and gazed stupidly at Thad in a bewildered way, while Frank looked at the usually

level-headed boy as though he thought the latter had taken leave of his senses.

"Who found it?" Tom finally found voice to say.

"Dick and I. Do you remember that cave we discovered a couple of years ago?"

"Of course. I have been in it lots of times. Is that the place?"

"Yes. We found the gold but that was all."

"How much gold was there?" asked Frank curiously.

"How much was it, Dick?" said Thad, turning to the former.

"Fifteen thousand five hundred and twenty dollars," replied Dick promptly.

"For the love of Peter!" gasped Tom. "Fifteen thou—well, I'll be darned! Say," he added "you fellows watch for sandbars, I couldn't tell a sandbar from Mt. Ararat; I'm too flustered."

"How do you like it, Tommy?" said Dick gleefully.

"I don't know, Dick. I'm all knocked out. I wanted to go to college with you fellows so bad I could taste it, and now maybe there is a little show. I knew my father couldn't afford to send me."

"I know it, Tom, and that is one reason why I wanted to divide with you instead of keeping it all ourselves," said Thad, laying his hand kindly on his comrade's shoulder.

The look of gratitude that Tom gave Thad through the moisture in his eyes made the latter

feel richer than if he had possessed a cave full of diamonds.

Frank Howard arose and stretched out his hand impulsively. "Thad Kingston, if ever a generous soul lived on earth it is you. I hate to say it to your face, but I've got to. Not one in a thousand would have done such a thing when you could have kept it all."

Thad crimsoned to the roots of his hair. "Oh, pshaw, Frank! Dick is just as deep in it as I am."

"I don't doubt it. He is split off the same block," said Tom, looking gratefully at his chubby partner.

"Now, boys," said Thad, wishing to change the conversation, "we must keep this thing mum, and just as soon as we get home, go down to our house, get a pick and shovel, and investigate things."

Four happy boys floated down the Mississippi after that episode. They were happy before, but now they were jubilantly happy. Tom insisted on doing the cooking and dish washing. If there was a sweep to pull, he was the first man there. In fact, he wanted to do everything, to show his appreciation of the boys' kindness toward him.

The remainder of the voyage was uneventful, and one fine Saturday morning about ten o'clock, the houseboat grated on the sand at the little village of T—. The trip of the Greased Lightning was ended.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BURIED DIAMONDS.

"Home again," shouted Dick, springing ashore with the line.

"Why are you so tickled to get back?" asked Tom with a mischievous wink at Thad and Frank.

Dick saw the wink, and retorted: "Oh, come now. You're barking up the wrong tree; it isn't what you think at all. I want to hug my old mammy, if you want to know; and I'm not ashamed of it either. She is better than diamonds."

"That's right, Dick. I only wish my mother were as near as yours," Frank remarked.

"What shall we do with our duffle; lock it up?" Tom asked.

"For the present, yes," replied Thad significantly. "Let's go right to our house; we can save our truck later."

"Boys, I can say truthfully, that was the jolliest and pleasantest trip I ever took in my life," said Frank heartily, as they walked up the bank.

"It was a splendid trip, and I guess we all enjoyed it hugely; I know I did," replied Thad.

"We take a trip to Europe or some other country nearly every summer," Frank went on; "but I have had more solid fun and comfort on this outing than I ever had before."

"It must be awful nice to be rich and buy what you want and go where you please," sighed Dick.

"I don't think you and Thad have any reason to complain after finding such a big lot of money," said Tom.

"No, I suppose not," admitted Dick, "but we must use part of that to get an education."

"You ought to be thankful you have it to use."

"We are," Thad chipped in, "and if the diamonds are there, you will have some for the same purpose."

"Maybe we can't sell them for much if anything, if we find them," said Tom doubtfully; his ideas in regard to the use and value of diamonds not being very clear.

"Don't you worry about that part of it," laughed Frank. "If they are genuine, we can sell them fast enough in New York."

"Did the man say how much they were worth?" asked Tom.

"No, but he said there were thousands of dollars worth."

"Maybe they are spoiled," ventured Tom, who seemed to fear that his fortune would slip away somehow.

At this remark Frank laughed immoderately. "Why, Tom, they dig them out of the dirt and clay where they have lain for ages, and they are bright as new dollars when found."

This bit of information brightened Tom up wonderfully and the only cloud now was, had the jewels been discovered by some one else? You may be sure no grass grew under the boys' feet and the mile walk was covered in a very short time.

"Here is the house and barn and woodshed, anyhow," cried Dick. "Bruno, do you know where you are?"

Bruno evidently did, for he bounded up the walk ahead of the boys and stood waiting at the door, his tail waving and his eyes shining with delight.

"Dinner for four," cried Thad, as they filed into the house.

Mr. Kingston sat writing at his desk, and Mrs. Kingston was sewing in a low rocking-chair by the opposite window.

"Well, well. If here aren't our hunters back again safe and sound," cried Mr. Kingston joyfully, as he arose and extended both hands. Dick dashed past the others, and a second later had his mother clasped in a bear-like hug.

"There, let up, Dick, and give me a show," laughed Thad after shaking hands with his father, walking over and interrupting the hugging and kissing bee by slipping his arm around Mrs. Kingston and giving her a fervent smack.

"Dear me, Thad. You are tanned dark as an Indian," and the handsome little woman looked up at her tall, bronzed, stalwart son standing there the picture of health, with a world of pride and affection in her eyes.

"That's because it was smoky, Indian-summer weather," put in Dick.

"You fellows all look hearty enough for prize-fighters," observed Mr. Kingston admiringly.

"We are, part of us," laughed Dick, giving Frank a sly poke in the ribs.

"We are here on business, papa," announced Thad after the greetings were over and they had settled down.

"Here on business?" echoed his father in astonishment, "haven't you come home to stay?"

"Yes, but business before pleasure, you know," replied Thad, enjoying his father's mystified look.

"You speak in riddles, my boy," said Mr. Kingston in a perplexed way.

"We made a discovery while we were gone."

"Well, of what nature?"

"Do you remember the cave incident; the finding of seven stone mugs and only six skeletons?"

"Perfectly," a faint light was beginning to dawn on Mr. Kingston's mind.

"Do you remember I told you and Thad that if we ever found that seventh man he could give the history of the cave, if he wanted to?" broke in the irrepressible Dick.

"Yes," replied Mr. Kingston, turning his head slowly toward his youngest son.

"Well, we found him," announced Dick in the most dramatic tone he could assume.

"Is it possible!" ejaculated Mr. Kingston in astonishment.

"Found him, and talked to him, and then—buried him," Dick went on tragically.

"This is getting interesting. Thad, suppose you tell me what you know about the matter without any more beating about the bush."

For the second time Thad told the story that he and Dick had listened to from the lips of a dying man far away in the Northern forest.

"Here is a paper with a rough sketch of the bluffs and cave, that he gave me just before he died," concluded Thad. "You see it is pretty accurate of the bluffs, and the front and rear entrance of the cave correspond almost exactly with our cave."

"I guess there is little doubt it is the same cave," said Mr. Kingston after scrutinizing the soiled bit of paper. "So this is your business," he added with a smile.

"Yes, sir. Our business is to find those dia-

monds before we eat, drink, or sleep," said Dick, arising with unwonted bustling activity.

"Hadn't you better wait until after dinner, Dick?" asked his mother with a demure smile.

Dick hesitated a moment, looked around at the others, and sank back into his chair. "I suppose we might eat a bite, first."

Then everybody roared, and Dick showed where his waistband failed to connect by two inches.

Some time after one o'clock, having disposed of a comforting dinner, the treasure hunters, reinforced by Mr. Kingston and armed with picks, shovels, crowbars, and lanterns, started for the cave.

As they walked along under the towering bluffs, Thad remarked to Frank:

"Here is where Dick and I broke the world's record on a quarter-mile dash, the time we tried to steal that hornets' nest you have heard about."

"And then the hornets won out," chimed in Dick.

"Yes, they won by a nose after all our hard running."

"If I am any judge, and I think I ought to be, they won by a tail," was the quick rejoinder, and everybody laughed at Dick's pun.

"I don't care," Dick went on. "I don't see how folks expect boys to grow up truthful when they keep telling them lies. Just think of filling

boys up on the kind of rot that fellow did Thad and me about hornets' nest wadding, when he knew we would get the liver stung out of us trying to get it."

"Probably he went through the mill in his youth and wanted the other boys to get a dose of the same medicine," suggested Tom. "You will be telling the same story to some boy in ten years."

"Not much," Dick asserted stoutly. "I'll make it my business to warn every boy I know."

"Dick is all right on that proposition," said Mr. Kingston. "People set a bad example by lying to and deceiving children; but many do it. They seem to think a boy is of no earthly account until he is grown. In fact, some people say that a boy should be barreled up and fed through the bung-hole until he is sixteen."

"Boys have a mighty hard time of it, take it all around, and it's a wonder they pan out as well as they do," observed Dick sagely.

"Well, Dick, here we are at the cave. If we find the jewels you can wear diamonds anyhow, that will be some consolation," said Mr. Kingston jokingly.

"Oh, it doesn't bother me any. I'm not a boy any more," replied Dick loftily.

The lantern was lighted and they passed into the damp, gloomy cavern. The mouth of the cave furnished light sufficient for digging purposes and Thad and Tom took the shovels and

began to dig along the south wall, corresponding, as nearly as they could locate, with a star marked on the paper. At the depth of a foot the shovels struck rock.

"Now we are coming to something," cried Dick in a suppressed, eager voice.

The dirt was shoveled away for a space of three or four feet along the wall, but no opening was found. Then Dick and his father took the shovels. Several feet more of dirt was cleaned off, but the rock bottom still continued and no evidences of a box or bundle were discovered. There was a dropping of jaws and a lengthening of faces as the work of shoveling progressed with no success. At length the dirt was cleaned away along the entire south wall, leaving the bare rock with no sign of an opening. Four very dejected-looking boys desisted from their labors.

"Is it possible we have been lied to?" said Thad, wiping his brow, the disappointment showing plainly in his face.

"Of course we have, but it's nothing more than we might expect. We have been lied to ever since we were born," replied Dick bitterly.

Mr. Kingston, who had been doing considerable thinking and figuring, remarked:

"I hardly think the man would lie to you on his deathbed, boys, even were he an outlaw. The better explanation, it seems to me, is that others of the gang, unbeknown to him, knew of the ex-

istence of the treasure here and have taken it away long ago. While he thought he was the only confidant, the captain may have had others."

"I don't know as it makes any difference which way it was; it isn't here," said Dick half sullenly.

"I feel more disappointed on Tom's account than anything else," said Frank regretfully, as his thoughts drifted back to the day Tom dove beneath the icy waters of the Mississippi to save his comrade's life. Poor Tom looked the picture of utter dejection. Good-bye to all thoughts of attending college now.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Kingston when they had stood around in solemn silence a few moments, "I sympathize with you in your disappointment, but I don't see that we can do anything more. If the diamonds were here, they would in all probability be where they were marked on the paper."

"I suppose so," replied Thad in a subdued voice, as with one accord they filed out of the cave.

What a change their feelings had undergone in a brief space of time! Jubilantly happy in the anticipation of untold wealth a few moments ago, and now, for the time at least, plunged into the depths of misery and despair.

The boys stood at the mouth of the cave a few moments, conversing in low tones; Tom stand-

ing a little apart. In truth the boy was keenly disappointed, more so than his talk indicated. Boy-like he had been building air castles all the way down the river after he knew of the fortune in store for him. First he would get an education; then he could do something and be somebody in the world. Now his brief dream was over and he would go back in his father's blacksmith shop and wear his life away shoeing horses. In spite of himself a tear rolled down his cheek.

Thad saw it, as Tom hastily averted his face that his comrades might not see his weakness, and a feeling of the deepest pity took possession of him; he remembered that he had been the first to raise the hope in Tom's heart. As he gazed at his dejected-looking comrade, something came to Thad like a flash and he cried:

"Say, boys, maybe they are under the rocks. I remember the man said *under* the south wall, not *by* the south wall. Don't let's get discouraged so easily. I am going to investigate along that wall if I have to blow it up with dynamite!"

Mr. Kingston shook his head doubtingly. "I am afraid the rocks are solid, Thad. However, if you wish we will look again."

Thad's energetic words aroused a faint hope, as drowning men catch at straws, and they entered the cave again.

"If we only had a broom to sweep the dirt and litter off these rocks we could tell whether there

are any seams here; the dirt is so damp and sticky we can't clean it off with the shovels thoroughly," said Mr. Kingston.

"I can run to the house and get one in ten minutes," cried Dick eagerly.

"I'll go with you," said Frank, and the two boys were off like a shot.

In an incredibly short time they were back with the broom, and Mr. Kingston swept the exposed stone clean as a floor.

"I see several seams," cried Dick after his father had swept the rocky floor. Meanwhile Thad had been studying the paper and comparing the location of the star with the wall. "It ought to be about here. Hold the lantern, Dick."

A moment later Thad exclaimed in suppressed excitement: "Hand me the crowbar."

His father complied; and Thad, inserting the crowbar in a small niche, spit on his hands and prepared to lift the world if necessary. He surged backward with all his force, but hardly had he expended the strength of a child, when the end of a rectangular-shaped stone flew up and Thad went over backward on a pile of damp earth, taking the crowbar along. He was on his feet in a second, but the stone had dropped to its place and grinned up at him innocently.

Dick nearly dropped the lantern when the stone came up, and as Thad sprang to his feet, he exclaimed, his eyes blazing with excitement:

"Boys, there is a hole under this rock; I saw it!"

Thad inserted the bar again, and quickly pried up the end of a stone fourteen by twenty-two inches in size, and about two inches in thickness. As he held it up with the bar, Mr. Kingston's powerful arms quickly lifted the stone from its long resting place, and laid it back on the pile of soft earth. Five necks were craned to look into the dark hole, and five pairs of glistening eyes vainly tried to pierce the gloom.

"Can you see anything?" Frank, who was in the rear, inquired anxiously.

"No," growled Dick. "This confounded lantern isn't any better than a lightning-bug."

Mr. Kingston scratched a match and held it down in the hole.

"I see it! I see a box! I see a box!" yelled Dick exultingly, dropping the lantern and diving down head first into the dark hole just as the match in his father's hands flickered out. Quick as a flash Mr. Kingston seized Dick by the back of the neck in a vice-like grip and lifting him bodily in his strong arms, bore him to the mouth of the cave ere the boy could raise a protest. The other boys quickly followed in terrified wonder; for they feared Mr. Kingston had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

As they reached the air Thad cried anxiously: "What's the matter, papa? Why did you act so with Dick, and why do you look so strange?"

Mr. Kingston's face was corpse-like in its pal-

lor, and his powerful frame shook like a reed in the wind. By a strong effort of the will he regained his self-control and said quietly, as the blood once more came into his face:

“There was a rattlesnake coiled up on the box.”

“For God’s sake! And Dick was going down head first onto him!” cried Thad with a shudder of horror, glancing fearfully into the cave as though half expecting to see the deadly rattler following them. Mr. Kingston, who had now thoroughly regained his composure, said:

“I just caught a glimpse of it in time. Why did you do such a foolhardy thing, my boy? You always act on impulse and it will get you into serious trouble some day if you don’t check it.”

Dick was very penitent as well as thoroughly scared. He said in a contrite voice:

“I know I do, papa; but I try to overcome it all I can. The sight of that box upset me so I hardly knew what I was doing. Boo! Think of poking your head in a rattlesnake’s den. How would you like it, Frank?”

“Please don’t mention it. It makes me sick to think of it,” replied Frank with a shiver.

“The next thing is to get a pole and kill that snake,” said Mr. Kingston, looking along the bluff.

“Here is just the thing,” called Tom, coming up with a hickory pole about ten feet in length.

“Light the lantern again—if Dick didn’t smash it when he made that crazy dive,” said Thad.

A match was scratched, and after a cautious look for snakes, the lantern, which was found intact, was relighted. Mr. Kingston flashed another match and held it down the hole. “Too late to kill that snake, boys; he is just crawling off the box.

“How are we to get the box up? Who will trust his hand down there?” asked Dick.

“Nobody,” replied his father coolly. “There is a ring in the end; we will cut a forked stick and pull it up.”

The hole sloped back under the wall. About two feet below the slab and back under the wall, reposed a box about twelve inches square.

“That snake did one good thing,” laughed Dick; “he took the wire edge off of our excitement on finding this box. I was all worked up a few minutes ago and now I don’t care a cent whether there is one diamond or a bushel.”

“I wouldn’t either if I had had as narrow an escape as you did,” said Thad.

With the aid of a forked stick the box was easily hauled up. Mr. Kingston then held a match down and explored the little recess with his eye, but nothing more was seen.

“Notice how nicely this slab fits,” he observed, replacing it in its former position. “No wonder it was hard to find.”

"This box isn't nearly so heavy as the other was, Dick," Thad said, picking up the box and carrying it to the entrance.

"From what I have read of diamonds, it doesn't have to be," Dick replied, looking around wisely.

"Shall we take it home before opening it, boys?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"Yes," everybody cried. So taking it under his arm, Mr. Kingston started off and the boys followed.

"How do you feel now, Tommy?" Dick asked gleefully.

Tom's eyes were fairly dancing. "Better," he replied quietly.

On their arrival home there was little ceremony in opening the box. Mr. Kingston cut it open with chisel and hammer. Inside was found another box—a much smaller one. This was also forced open. The boys took one look, and then everybody threw up his hat and shouted.

Flashing and gleaming before them lay more diamonds than Thad, Tom, or Dick supposed were in the world. White diamonds, blue diamonds, rose-colored diamonds; big diamonds, and little diamonds laughed and sparkled in the sunlight as though glad to be released from their long imprisonment.

"Hurrah!" cried Dick, "that is a find for you! I'll bet they are worth nearly as much as the gold we found."

Frank, who saw diamonds every day at home, laughed at Dick's simplicity.

"I would like to buy diamonds of you, Dick. Why, here is one stone that is worth nearly that much," holding up a large jewel that glinted and flashed in the sunshine.

"The dickens you say!" and Dick's mouth opened wide enough to take in a pumpkin.

"From what I know of diamonds, they look like a remarkably fine lot," observed Mr. Kingston admiringly.

"I am sure of it," Frank replied enthusiastically.

"The next question is, what are you going to do with them, boys? You can't eat them."

"Sell 'em and pocket the money," responded Dick promptly.

"Sensible idea, but you can't sell them here."

"I should say send or take them to Tiffany's," counseled Frank.

"I suppose you could do better there," said Mr. Kingston thoughtfully, "but some one ought to be there to attend to the sale."

"Papa would be glad to attend to it, I know," replied Frank.

"I want mamma to have one for a diamond ring or brooch or something," said Dick.

"Better sell them, Dick. Poor folks cannot afford to wear diamonds," laughed Mrs. Kingston, who was admiring the jewels with the others.

"I will tell you a jolly plan if you can arrange it," cried Frank suddenly.

"What is that?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"Why, you know Thad and Dick and Tom are going East to school anyhow, and if you can get a vacation, bring Mrs. Kingston along and pay us a visit. Then you and papa can see to disposing of the diamonds, and I will show the boys around town."

"Oh, won't that be jolly!" cried Dick, clapping his hands.

"What say you, mother, would you like the trip?" inquired Mr. Kingston, turning to his wife.

"Very much, if you can get away."

"I can manage that I think, as it is the season when I generally take a vacation to shoot ducks."

And so it was arranged that the entire party should go East together, taking the diamonds with them.

"How much do you think they are worth, papa?" asked Dick, pointing to the jewels.

"I couldn't say, Dick, I never purchased many; ask Frank," smiled Mr. Kingston.

"Will the money we get for a fourth of them pay Tom's way through college?" asked Dick, turning to Frank.

Frank laughed. "I hope so. At a rough guess I should say there is not less than forty thousand dollars worth; perhaps more."

Dick nearly fell off his chair and Tom gasped at these figures.

"And by the way, boys," Frank continued, "I am not going to accept a fourth interest in them."

"You aren't? Why not?" gasped Dick in amazement.

"Because," replied Frank, flushing slightly, "you boys need it more than I do. I dislike to speak of private affairs, but will say here just between us, that I am worth a quarter of a million in my own right, inherited from my grandmother; besides, papa is supposed to be a millionaire several times over. I hope you won't think I am boasting, boys, but I thought it necessary to tell you this so you would understand why I think it wouldn't be right for me to accept a share of the money we get for the diamonds."

"Of course we don't," replied Thad; "and so," he added jokingly, "we have been entertaining a millionaire."

"I hope I have acted like any one else," said Frank modestly.

"You have acted a darn sight better than most folks," Dick burst out.

Tom Evans was in a seventh heaven of joy. It was the first bit of good luck that ever blew his way. His family were rough, ignorant, hard-working people, who looked upon education as a luxury, instead of a necessary adjunct

to civilization. Tom's father was fond of saying: "Poor folks hain't no use fur eddycation, more'n to read and write. It don't make their arms any stronger. I couldn't shoe any more hosses if I had all the book larnin' in the world."

Tom, however, had vague longings for something better and higher. He had helped his father in the shop since, as he expressed it, "he was knee high to a bumble bee." First, switching flies from the horses; and thence grading up to the dignity of shoeing. How he hated it all. Three months schooling in the winter had been the extent of his educational advantages. And now he was to leave his drudgery and go away to school, and know something of the world. Small wonder he was happy. Of course he would have to start considerably below Thad and Dick in preparatory work, but he could make up for that in hard study.

Everybody was pledged to secrecy over the diamonds, and the boys returned to unload the Greased Lightning.

Tom noticed Frank admiring the panther skin, and said:

"How would you like that for a rug, to remember your trip by?"

"First-rate."

"Then take it."

"But it is yours; you killed it," said Frank.

"Take it before I do something desperate."

It's queer if I can't do anything for anybody," returned Tom.

This appeal was too much, and Frank accepted the offering.

Then Thad thought they ought to have some of the mink skins made into muffs, boas, etcetera. It was finally decided to pack all the furs and ship them to Frank's address, there to select what they wanted tanned and sell the rest.

A week later, the Kingstons and Frank, conveying the precious merchandise of diamonds and furs, started for New York.

At the last moment Tom's mother, who had been afflicted with a chronic ailment for years, became so much worse that it was known her days were few, and Tom decided to remain with her till the end.

Ten days after his friends' departure, Tom received a letter from Thad.

We quote a passage or two:

"But I know you are boiling over to hear about the diamonds. They were more valuable than we thought. After keeping out a moderate sized one for each (including yourself) as a souvenir, we sold the others for sixty thousand dollars, and deposited the money in the bank. Your share is twenty thousand, as Frank wouldn't take a cent. They are fine people, and not a bit stuck up or haughty, as I supposed millionaires were, especially at home. I wish you were here, Tom; you wouldn't laugh at

Frank in the woods any more. He knows everything about a city, while Dick and I are like blind puppies in a haymow. Come soon as you can, we want to have some fun with you.

“Yours truly,
“THAD KINGSTON.”

THE END.

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